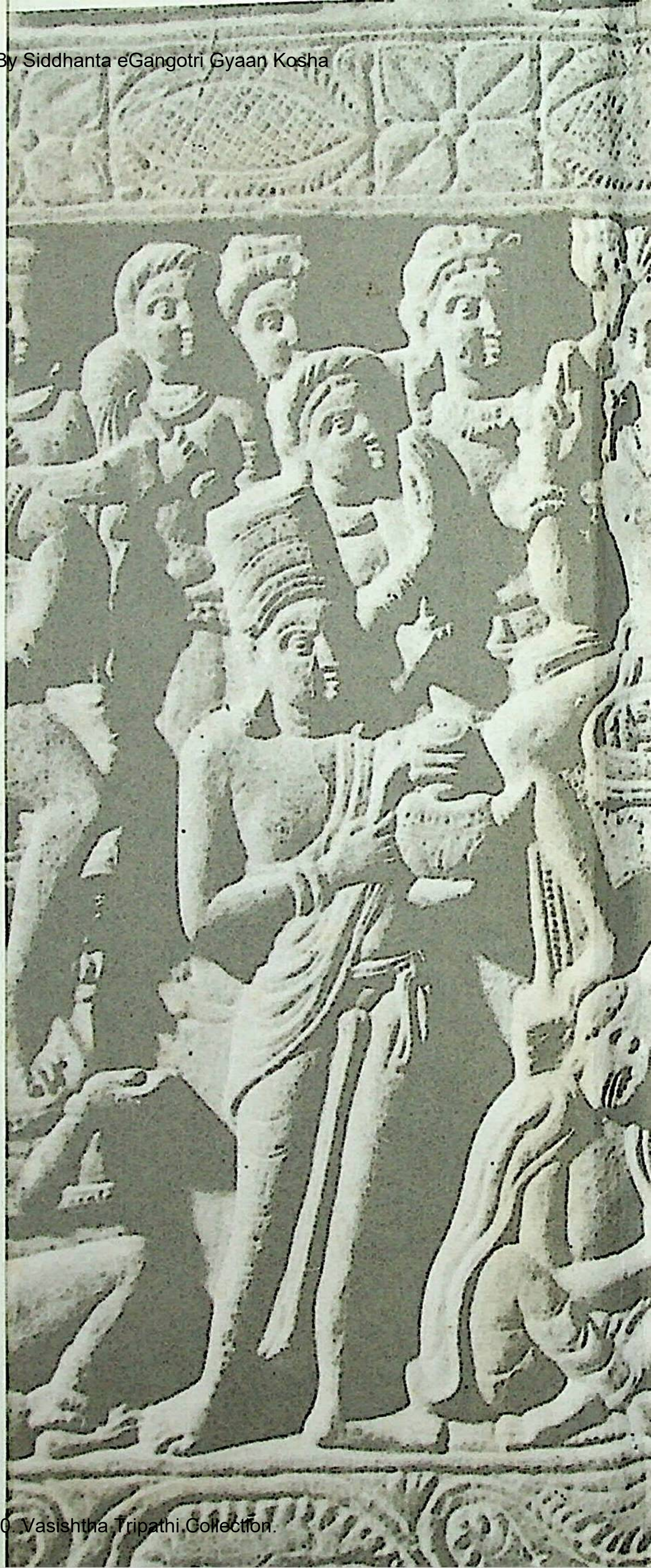
Shankar Mokashi Punekar

AWADHESHWARI

Translated by
P.P. Giridhar

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-time bests of creative fiction in
nnada.





AWADHESHWARI

The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a script recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From: Nagarjunkonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi

Sahitya Akademi Award winning Kannada novel

AWADHESHWARI

Shankar Mokashi Punekar

Translated into English by

P. P. Giridhar



SAHITYA AKADEMI

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Translator's Remarks

It has been a pleasure Englishing this novel although I was not quite familiar, to begin with, with its Vedic background, and so approached it with considerable diffidence and trepidation. It has been an edifying and enriching experience as all translation experiences are. At the end of a task which was by turns hopelessly undoable, challenging, daunting, painful, frustrating, eminently doable, satisfying and exhilarating, I have the gut feeling that I have successfully captured. an alien thought movement in a linguistic code other than the one in which the movement was originally expressed. And the feeling that a considerable measure of, if not total, success is indeed possible is all the more satisfying and delightful. It has been a piece of work well worth doing. One is reminded of the redoubtable Kiran Bedi's book 'It is Always Possible'. As a translator mediating two sociocultural worlds, one always feels the tension between the two extremes viz. that languages are commensurable and therefore whatever is expressed in code A must be capable of being expressed in code B. This is precisely the reason why translation is possible at all. The other position viz. that if not ineffable, much of what is translated in code B leaves the bilingual genuinely dissatisfied. One per force agrees that the greatness of all great poetry is locked up in the source language. This is not a parallel to the other time-honoured opposition between literal and free translation, translation by the letter and translation by the spirit. Even when you translate by the spirit, the best that could be done in the target language does not, one feels, quite capture the flavor, or whatever, of the original. Seemingly simple sentences like

1. The globe is oblate

2. Beena is bereaved.

leave the translator struggling for equivalences. A safe guess is that not many languages lexicalise the semantic and grammatical information that the words *oblate* and *bereave* encapsulate. *oblate* means 'flat at the central bottom'. Most languages would have an inelegantly long phrase to express the semantic content. The case with *bereaved* is worse. One would have to start the sentence with 'someone ' and say

Someone close to, related to, friendly with Beena died.

Now the original sentence is not about someone, it is about Beena. Further, who died is left delightfully unexpressed in the original sentence. But other languages are structurally forced to express who it was who died. Since who died is left delightfully open-ended in the original, translating it as 'someone close to, related to, friendly with' may not be right. I may say I feel bereaved even if my enemy dies or someone not known to me, or related to me, say, President Bush dies. Since other languages are structurally constrained to say who it was who died and since the original leaves the identity of the dier unexpressed, any translation in the target language is going to be incorrect. Supposing to obviate this difficulty, you avoid reference to the relationship of the dier to Beena and translate the sentence as the equivalent of

Someone died

You immediately see that the translation is further removed from the original! There are such seemingly and really insurmountable problems with translation. Yet it is true that whatever a speaker of a particular language can conceive the speakers of other languages can conceive too. The speakers of other languages can jolly well conceive what is happening in

the word *bereave* but their own languages won't let them say it the way English does. On the positive side, there is this feeling that words like *dharma* are untranslatable. I don't quite agree. Bhasham in his 'The glory that was India' says 'righteousness' is not adequate as a translation of *dharma*, and that the word is more pregnant. My submission is that if this 'pregnancy' is externalisable at all in terms of an expression in any human language, then a translation is very much on the cards. If the argument is that in addition to its referential meaning it has emotive, connotative meanings, then one may not find a single word expressing this complex of meanings in any other language. Fine. But I submit the word *dharma* does not bear this complex of meanings every time it is used. In its individual occurrences, its meaning is quite delimitable. For example, take *dharma patni* which could quite adequately be translated as 'lawful wife' or 'lawfully wedded wife' So would be the case with locutions like *dharma grantha, dharma sankata, dharma* by itself etc. I didn't find problematic translating words like *shraaddha, chaula, aahuti, prahara, niyoga, muttaide, mumukshu* and so on. *dharma darshi* means both 'overseer of righteousness; beaconlight of righteousness' and 'trustee'. It could mean both in its use in chapter Trasadasyu-5. There is a contrast in Kannada between the nonhonorific and the honorific expressions of personal names so that Shyama Bhatta and Shyama Bhattaru are different, the latter unlike the former being honorific. This contrast has been left uncaptured as neither of the prefixed honorific pieces viz. Mr. and Shri seems to be acceptable.

I submit it is a straightforward translation, neither a transcreation nor an agenda-driven rendering. Neither the choice of the text to be translated nor the translation is a

political act! I have kept to a neutral kind of English, neither colloquial, nor modish nor heavily literary except when warranted by the original. A mix up of the different varieties and styles of a language viz. colloquial, slang, taboo slang, modish, hip, formal, jocular, approving, disapproving and so on could be inappropriately jarring, and downright funny. This would be legal in postcolonial discourse though. I earnestly hope that the translation captures the spirit pulsing the original, and that it sounds English and yet carries in its innards the sensibility of a non-English culture, as, to make the source language sensibility wholly at home in target language art, as I said in my preface to my English translation of another award-winning Kannada novel **Vaishakha** (Sahitya Akademi, 2000), is what literary translation is all about. If this has happened as I think it has, it would be a contribution to the world of English literature. If the readers feel so too, it would have been well worth taking up.

Grateful thanks are returned to an anonymous reviewer for some perceptive comments, to Ms Chaitali of IIT, Mumbai, Ms Nagalakshmi of Maharani's Arts College, Mysore for helping me with the meaning of the Sanskrit rgvedic suuktas, and to Sri Sitaram Jagirdar, Dr C.H Srinivasamurthy of Sharada Vilas College, Mysore, Sri Lakshmi Narayan of Mahajana's College, Mysore for some help with the English translation of some individual words and, equally importantly, to the Sahitya Akademi for commissioning the translation in the first place. The author Prof Shankar Mokashi Punekar was delighted to see the couple of translated chapters that I sent him. He wrote back expressing satisfaction with the translated chapters and

marveling at my English language skills. It is a pleasure to place on record my sense of gratitude to him for naming me as the translator for his novel. It is my devout hope that he will get to see the published English incarnation of his novel and that he will find it generally satisfactory, if not unputdownably piquant.

Mysore
July the 15th 2004

P.P.GIRIDHAR,

FOREWORD

This is a political novel of the Vedic times. The main characters of Purukutsa, Trasadasyu, Vrishajana, Purukutsani, and Shambarasura all figure in the Rgveda. The first three of these have written Vedic hymns*. They are the forefathers of the forty-second descending generation of Sri Ramachandra of Ayodhye. The scripture of 'Brihaddevatha' says that the main incident of the novel viz. the discord between Trasadasyu and Vrishajana happened during the time of Trayyaruna, Trasadasyu's great grandchild. Some purana-niruktas however affirm that Trasadasyu and Trayyaruna are the same person. Trasadasyu figures seven times in several such variant spellings as *tridas*, *trasathha*, and *trita* in the hundred Mohenjodaro seals that I have read. Based on the spelling of 'trita', I have deduced that the composer named as *kutsa* or *tritaaapta* is indeed Purukutsa (the last chapter), and translated the hymn. I believe that my translation is more appropriate although it enlists help from Sayana, Oldenburg and Griffith. A script called 'akshapada' had developed right during the Vedic times. Harappan seals were written in this script (from right to left like the Arabic

*A suukta is a hymn addressed to a Vedic deity, a Vedic hymn consisting of many verses which are called *mantras* on various occasions like sacrifice, worship and so on.. Rigveda is constituted of (ten) *mandalas* and the *mandalas* are constituted of several *suuktas*. In the Vedas, elements of nature like stone, tree, morning etc were also called 'deities'.

script). Only these are contemporaneous with the Vedas. The Brahmanas, the Upanishads, Nirukta, and Brihaddevatha are of relatively recent origin. Harappan seals were not available for Skandaswamy, Saayana and the Germans all of whom tried to interpret the Vedas. The Akshapada script was syllabic in nature. This syllabic script died once phonemic scripts like Kharoshthi, Brahmi, and Nagari scripts came on the scene. It was used till the Vedic times just for writing the sacrificial boards. Panini has ridiculed these board-writers, dubbing these as 'copyists and writers.' The practice of doing these boards and keeping them in remembrance of auspicious occasions was in vogue until I had my thread-investiture ceremony. It is remarkable that the names of several Rgvedins figure in the Harappan seals. Not all the authors of the Rigvedic hymns were ascetics. Vrishajana was of course a vicious reviler. Yet he has composed hymns and he figures in the seals. Kings who performed the horse-sacrifice, ascetic renunciates who got sacrifices done, murderers like Takshaka, carpenters, musters of guards of elephant-houses, watchmen, mementoes of tantric sacrifices done to effect curses done by servants hurt by their bosses, and the Harappa seals all play before our eyes Vedic life. Not all who lived during the Vedic times were ascetics. Some of them have sung their personal jealousies and animosities in the hymns. (Puru)Kutsa's outpouring of 'Oh the heavens and the earth! Understand my plight!' is an anguished cry of someone who has suffered in the whirlpool of life. To give it a sacrificial-spiritual interpretation because it is a Rigvedic hymn is to do disservice to his poetic prowess. Hurt by Vrisha's vituperation, the sensitive Trasadasyu has called himself a demi-god in an access of self-respect. Oldenburg has

interpreted his hymn as a paradox without quite understanding the feelings of someone struggling in a severe identity crisis of the kind that Hamlet found himself in. One can get wise to the propriety of Kutsa's statement if one understands his existential predicament in which neither self-calumny nor self-praise was within his control. The reply that Trasadasyu gave Vrisha has found expression on two dumb scriptless seals. In one a huge elephant is, with a meek face, suffering the stings of two scorpions. (*chelu* (Kannada for scorpion)-*vrischika* (Sanskrit for scorpion)-*Vrishajana*. See the cover page). In the other a wild deer is ambling along with a relaxed tread, fastening its eyes on two stars. Two scorpions are giving chase. A boy is standing in the middle. Neither of the seals has a script. The word *vrishajana* has been after some deletion turned into *vrischika*, with an ironic meaning, in what is a silent picture. This could be construed as a great cartoon of the Vedic age.

It would be futile to narrate things in the Vedic language just because the subject matter is Vedic. Walter Scott who tried to imitate the language of eight hundred years ago is today the butt of ridicule. What do we know about the Vedic language? Real Historical Realism comes into existence from dull incidents. Besides Purukutsani, two other princesses are described as 'father's maidens.' Coins were in currency in Sumeru even as far back as 4,500 B.C. They were in vogue even before that in Egypt. Indian coins have been described in the Vedic Hymn to Goddess Lakshmi, the Srisukta: *kaansyasthitaam hiranyapraakaaraam* It is from the word '*kaansya*'that the Kannada words *kaasu* "money, coin" and *kanchu**

*Remains of a mint meant for melting copper have been found in Chenhudako.

bronze" have been derived. The Kannada word 'raaya' has been used in the plural in the Vedas. After the gold coin went out of vogue this word became 'rupayya'. It was in the Vedic times that all our betting games came into being: letta, card games and so on. To include *padi* and *godhuma* under betting games would be ridiculous. Pargitor in the book, 'Dynasties of Kali Age' has suggested another vitally important possibility viz. the original puranas might be in Prakrit. Sanskrit might have risen in 3500 B.C and for all India publicity the Sanskritisation of the Prakrit puranas took place. Sanskrit names like Haihaya, Bhagiratha were used for middle-eastern names like Yahya, Phaga in the Puranas. The idea was indianisation of a mixed culture. I have read somewhere that a letter with Dasharatha's (Tusrata) signature has been found in the royal correspondence of the Egyptian kings. The Himalayas were not that high then. Contact with Asia and Africa through land was still possible. Horses from Caucasus, paper and glass from China, and knives and swords from Turkey and Armenia used to come to India only through land routes. As far as I can tell, it is impossible to liven up those times through language. Narrativising what happened in our own language style, I have left the cause-effect relations between them to be deduced by the reader. All I want to say is that this is also a type of Historical Realism. There is no reason to think it would be absurd to recount unfamiliar ancient incidents in familiar language environs. To mention railway trains isn't necessary at all. The core of Historical Realism is the feeling of 'they are like us'.

Some German and English scholars created this divine illusion that 'Aryans came over to India through the Khyber pass', based purely on linguistic evidence. Why

this laboured difficulty, I thought to myself before I wondered: Is there mention of this displacement of people in the Vedas. This illusion hasn't yet died out. Geologists have averred that the western part of Africa split into two about 5,000,000 years ago, and floating off several thousands of miles, became the present South America. They attribute this to geological phenomena like earthquakes and volcanoes. They have called this the 'drift of continents'. Harappan seals have been found even in Sumeru and Babylon. How did they get there? By ship? Was there Suez canal then? The names of all the kings that figure in the Vedas are all preislam middle eastern. Why is this so? How and why did names like Ikshvaku (Isac), Purukutsa (faruka), Trasadasyu (Tausipha), Nabhanedishte (Nebuchednajhar), Narasimha (Naram-Sin, the Babylon king) come into vogue in India? And why did they disappear? Karnaka, which was once a historic Egyptian province, is Karnataka in India. Goddess Elam is Ellamma in Karnataka. Thebes the city deity is Thibbadevi here. The Greek Oedipus is Ayyappa here. (This is mentioned in the seals) Alexander has become Skanda the son of Shiva and become part of the puranas. There is only one explanation for these geographical-historical displacements viz. Drift of Continents. The eastern part of Africa didn't float away in one piece unlike the western part that did. It came away in several island pieces, joined together in front and at the back before turning into seamless mountains and becoming the peninsula that India is today. Those who saw this were Manu (India), Noah (The Old Bible), and Thesius (The ancient Greek hero), these people lived before 5000 B.C. The yarns that came into existence about these people are wonderfully exciting. Geologists believed hitherto that the drift of continents happened because of the explosion of a

volcano when the earth's outer crust got soft. The American scientist named Gold, who appeared on the scene recently, says for such a fundamental event to happen there need be no volcano. He surprised the world by saying that such events could happen because of the expansion of the Methane gas. This process continues to happen in the Pacific Ocean even today. A Richard Chase novel describes a new island that has recently emerged from the ocean bed.

If this is true, our guess of what happened could be included in history as a 'geological phenomenon'. Manu is a historical figure, and not a fictitious figure. His name figures in the seals. It is ridiculous to say that the Aryans came to India grazing their cattle via the Khyber Pass. None came from outside. Everyone came along with their landmasses. They came along with the language, civilization, learning and knowledge that they had developed in their lands. The Himalayas erupted, and stood as a massive and protective fortress for India because of the great destructive floods that took place during Manu's time. What caused the Himalayas was the fact that the Matsya country came floating and pushed eastward the Trutsu Empire that existed before. This is the Fish-Incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the *matstyavatara*. The continent of Brigukuchha came floating and merged with the east part of the Matsya country. This is the Tortoise-Incarnation, the second of Lord Vishnu's incarnations, the *kuurmatavatara*. The Boar-Incarnation, the third of Lord Vishnu's incarnations, the *varaahavatara* is the event of the creation of the Vindhya Mountains after the Varahata landmass came floating to join the bottom part of the Bhrigukachha landmass. There is an ancient story, a legend, which says that Vindhya came in the way of Sun's movement, but Sage

Agastya stopped it. In the Man-Lion incarnation the *narasimhavatara*, the Middle East landmasses of Sumeru and Babylonia came to India along with the sacred codified texts of Naram-sin and along with the memory of Hiranyakashipu, the *rakshasa* king whom Lord Vishnu vanquished, became Kashmir and thus the northern tip of India. In the Dwarf-Incarnation the fifth of Lord Vishnu's incarnations, the *vamanavatara* the piece of land that came along with Emperor Bali became Baluchistana-Bhalika. An island floated away to turn into the Bali island. In the *parashuramavatara,* the Parashurama-Incarnation the Konkan belt, and the Austric continent joined to become Dakshinapatha, the geographical entity south of the Vindhyas. The Rama-Incarnation, the *ramavatara* achieved the cultural union of these coalescing landmasses. In Lord Vishnu's Krishna-Incarnation Dwarake shone as the gateway to India. Nonviolence became India's prescribed duty, man's obligatory moral demeanor in the Buddha-Incarnation. In the present age of Kalki-Incarnation, we have become the stooges of history.

There is nothing new to us, nothing is outside, nothing apart from us. It is our geography and history that have made tolerance and peaceful coexistence possible. Lord Vishnu's valorous achievement (the unsystematic welding together of so many continents) is what has made possible here the deep synergy that obtains among so many cultures, communities, languages and castes. Isn't this the subject of the Vedic Hymn to Lord Vishnu, the *vishnusukta*:

idam vishnurvichalkramee treedhaa ni dadhee padam I
samuuLyamasya paansuree II

(Through all this world strode Lord Vishnu, thrice his foot

he planted
and the Whole was gathered in his footstep's dust.)

The 154th *suukta* of the first *mandala* of the Rigveda (the VishNu suukta) is a delightful description of how the Himalayas rose as a kind of architectural formation of the high mountains after a welding together of so many islands.

vishnornu kam viiryaaNi pravoocham yaha paarthivaani
vimamee rajaansi I
yoo askabhaayaduttaram sadhastham vichakramaa
nastreedhorugaayaha II

(I will declare/praise Lord Vishnu's mighty deeds, of Him who measured out the earthly regions, of Him who propped the highest place of congregation thrice, striding and setting down his feet.)

pra tadvishNuhu stavate viiryeeNa mrigoo na bhiimaha kucharo girishThaa .(the second line of this verse is not given)

(For this his mighty deed is Vishnu lauded, like some wild beast, dreadful, prowling, roaming the mountain.)

pra vishNavee shuushameetu manma girikshita
urugaayaya vrishNee I
ya idam diirgham prayatam sadasthameekoo vimaye
tribhiritpadeebhihi II

(Let the hymn lift itself as strength to Lord Vishnu, the Bull with a big striding tread and dwelling on the mountains, Him who alone with three steps has measured this long and far-extended common dwelling place.)

taa vaam vaastuunyushmasi gamadhyee yatra gaavoo
bhuuri shrungaa aayaasaha I
atraaha tadurugaayasya vrishNaha paramam padamava
bhaati buuri II

(We may go into your dwelling-places where there are many-horned and nimble oxen. For, mightily, there shines down upon us the widely-striding Bull's sublimest mansion) (Rgveda 1.154)

If we are not obstinate about giving every Vedic poem a sacrificial-ritual interpretation, we can see that the foregoing hymn documents the eye-witness account of the way the Himalayan range of mountains, the architectural feat that it is, rose like a cow with high horns. This was the event of Manu's times. People who are skilled at argumentation and who lived after the Vedic times juggled with words to get the sacrificial- ritual interpretation. They didn't know that this was a geographical phenomenon. Had these scholars atleast had the poetic heart of a Kalidasa, they could have pictured that astonishingly wonderful scene

Puurvaaparoo tooyanidhii vagaahya shtitaha

(The Himalayas that rose pushing the oceans of the west and east)

What a delightfully graphic scene! There is a world of difference between saying that the Vedic sayings were used for sacrificial rituals after taking the place of divine sayings, and that all the Vedic compositions were constructed only for sacrificial rituals. Even though Vrishajana's biting tirade has figured in the Rigveda, which sacrificial ritual is it useful for? Even people who believe that the Vedas are authorless, not man-made, would have to select appropriate hymns for the success of their sacrificial rituals. There are such noble hymns as well. But those who aver that every hymn is meant only for sacrificial rituals have small minds.

It was through the great poet Da.Raa.Bendre that I

came to know for the first time that Vivaswat, Manu and the Ikshwaku sage-kings that figure in the Bhagavad-Gita belonged to Egypt. That great soul is no more. He was the one who told me that he went sleepless for three days after reading my novel, 'Gangavva Gangamayi'. It is only at the instance of, and on the basis of some of his light-veined but suggestive talk that I have decided to write a book called A Unified Theory of Oriental Paleography in the near future. There is no death for sublime souls, says Yeats. I dedicate this novel to the late Bendre, praying that, even if he is not with us, he would inspire me from time to time and afford spiritual sustenance.

Many fine Kannada minds, people of as high a calibre and stature as Bendre, Govinda Pai, B.M.Shrikantayya, Veerakeesari, Deevudu, Kuvempu, Pu.Thi.Na, Puttuswamayya, Masti, have studied and plumbed the depths of the Kannada culture. It is true that this book is not of the same order. Yet the purpose is the same. It is but proper to remember them here. My supplication here is that readers should read this attempt to add to that mainstream Kannada tradition as a piece of creative fiction, and not as a piece of research.

Shankar Mokashi Punekar

PART ONE : PURUKUTSA

1

Ayodhye, the place hallowed by SriRamachandra's name, is now a dilapidated godforsaken outpost of human habitation. It wasn't such a petty hamlet before SriRama set foot there. Nor was it a sprawling empire. It was the capital of King Purukutsa who ruled over forty to fifty villages. Purukutsa was a pleasure-loving bohemian. Narmada Purukutsani was his queen. King Purukutsa, however, didn't relate to his queen the way a husband normally relates to his wife. This was because Purukutsani was Purukutsa's younger sister. Their wedding had come about in their childhood according to traditions of the Sun Dynasty. This was the way they kept outsiders outside the royal family. This was the tradition in Egyptian royal families. King Purukutsa could never forget that his queen was his younger sister, one of his own blood. They didn't beget any children. Purukutsani who was also an equally rightful claimant to the royal household ruled the kingdom like a real queen, all the reins of the state, which were formally with her elder brother-husband, securely in her hands. Conjugal bliss however was beyond her reach. How this distinctive marriage system disappeared is the theme of our novel.

2

"Kalia!" King Purukusta called out.

"My Worshipful Lord!" Kalia came running and after paying his due respects, stood expectantly.

"Did Tarkshya come?" the king asked as he downed another draught of liquor, his voice particularly keen and eager.

"No, Your Royal Majesty! He hasn't," Kalia said in reply.

"Send him in as soon as he gets here", the king enjoined. "As you wish, My Lord!"

This was the fourth time that the king had asked the question that day, and it was the fourth time Kalia had answered him. Kalia had been hearing this question for the last two years. He had so many times given the reply that he gave today. Their dialogue ended there. Kalia who was seventeen years of age was fed up to his back teeth having listened to the self-same words times without number.

A large and stately hut in the mango orchard separated by a fence. Outside the fence six men stood guard. Inside were the solitary king and his servant Kalia. Kalia who had been employed when he was fifteen years old enjoyed a special place among the king's staffers. He was a new comer. He didn't know any one. He was a boy of few words. He wasn't familiar with the cultured language of the royal court. Since he belonged to the Naga caste, people found it difficult to follow the way he pronounced his words. He was good-looking and innocent. Of late he had become familiar in bits and pieces with the king's daily

routine. The courtesans, the entertainers and the women hired for the king's sensual indulgence that Tarkshya brought either on horseback or in a chariot would also drink following the king and go to sleep. Kalia's daily routine consisted of carrying these women out, waking them up early in the morning and after driving them out, farming them out to the guardsmen. He didn't know where they came from. He didn't know their language, nor did they understand his. Only the king understood what he spoke. That was because he knew Kalia's language. He had learnt it in his childhood, from his mother. His mother Bindumathidevi was a Kshatriya of the Naga region. Naga Brahmins, Brahmins of the Naga region, that is, had migrated to and settled down in Ayodhye having come there initially for her Naga worship when she was the queen. Many Naga servants had got into the king's staff too, before going up the hierarchy rather easily. It was precisely for this reason that Queen Purukutsani had appointed Kalia and made him the king's intimate servant. The Naga language and the Aryan language were not very different from each other. They differed in the way they were pronounced. The sound *a* became *o*. In Kalia's language, every breath group was preceded by the short vowel, *a*, which was a kind of speech-heralder, indicating an imminent speech continuum and this would tell on intelligibility. King Mandata, a distant relative of the Pero kings of the country of Aigupta, wrote to them enquiring about the marriage of Prince Purukutsa. The reply came inside two months: As per their convention, it said, the royal blood should stay pure. The crown prince ought to marry a blood-relative for the perpetuation of their kind. There was none of Egyptian blood for the prince to marry except Purukutsani, his own younger sister. Brahmins of

the Vasishtha clan of Ayodhya disapproved of this saying it went against the principle of the Mystery of Birth. The Naga Brahmins said it was preposterous according to their tradition. It seemed to Bindumathidevi too to be against the law of righteous, morally obligatory conduct, the dharma. The Kshatriyas however supported this agreeing as they did to the idea of purity of royal blood. The wedding of the twelve-year old Purukutsa with the eight-year old Narmada Purukutsani came off.

When Purukutsa was fourteen years of age, his mother Bindumathidevi passed away, sorrowing and pining. When he was sixteen, his father King Mandatha died of consumption. Purukutsa was crowned king at a coronation got together by men worthy of respect and honour who enlisted the help of the Naga Brahmins. Purukutsani was then just twelve years old.

Like all princesses Purukutsani was a bit tomboyish. She would play with her husband as if he was a friend of hers. She would get on horseback, climb trees, and in the game of monkey-on-the-tree, defeat him, which brought on tears to his eyes. In wrestling she would get him flat on his back on the ground before sitting on his chest. In the game of drubbing-with-the-canestick, she would catch him a couple on his back, which had the king in tears. Bindumathidevi who was worried about her daughter's future would hit her own daughter a couple of times so as to see the game squared up. Purukutsani would then go snivelling to her father Mandhata and complain. Mandhata would then get cross with Bindumathidevi. A couple of times when the king thus got angry, Bindumathidevi would reduce him to silence by broaching the unsatisfyingly improper marriage of their daughter. Mandhata would then

console Purukutsani herself avoiding a face-off with Bindumathidevi. Once, one hot word leading to another, Mandhata called her 'donkey' in the rustic Awadhi language."Yes" Bindumathidevi shot back."Your very household is an asinine household!" She passed away in the next six months, pining and sorrowing.

Purukutsa came to believe that his own sister was the cause of his mother's death.

As it generally happens with princesses, Purukutsani attained puberty rather late. She was fourteen when she came round --- two months after her mother went to meet her Maker. Since puberty brought on a period of impurity, the consummation ceremony was deferred by one full year.

The wife didn't give up playing with her husband the whole year round that year except for three days of each month. She would have the upper hand in all games. To bring others to play with the boyish Purukutsa was forbidden by a royal injunction.

As King Mandhata's pulmonary tuberculosis exacerbated, he got increasingly keen to see his son's consummation ceremony come through. Even as the period of impurity of one year got over, an auspicious day was fixed for the consummation ceremony. Waving a censer of a camphor flame downwards in front of the couple with all appropriate ceremony, and singing songs that invited the couple to the ceremonial seat, the two were pushed into the bridal room. Without the confidential counsel of the mother and nobody mustering the courage to tell her what ought to happen between a husband and his wife on the wedding night, Purukutsani continued with her games even inside the bridal room. Purukutsa sat leaning against a wall. Sores and weals had appeared on his back. As soon as the door

opened in the morning, Purukutsa ran to his father and showed him the weals on his back and the imprint of Purukutsani's row of teeth on his hand. "She is still too young." her father said to himself, smiling her behaviour away. "Only time will impart to her a sense of the occasion."

Time however didn't change anything.

King Mandhatha died in a year from then.

As soon as Purukutsa became the king, he stopped spending any time with her. In fact he started sleeping in a different room. Some Arya Kshatriyas, Naga Kshatriyas and some sons of tradesmen began to hang around him. To begin with, Purukutsa did keep and nurse many people so that he could satisfy the itch of his palate. Courtiers and other nobility saw to his pleasures of the flesh. Women who made themselves available only to the king and other highly placed people began to come in to assuage the fire in his loins. Since Purukutsa was now the king, restrictions on who would or wouldn't be his companions disappeared.

Purukutsani had indeed thought that the marriage was really meant to give her a playmate. Now when her husband gave her up as a companion, she did fret a bit, but she quickly forgot about it as she kept Sundari who was the daughter of a chieftain and Vajra who was the chieftain's younger brother as companions to play with. Sundari was then sixteen years old. Their friendship was warm and intimate. Unfortunately in less than six months Sundari was engaged to be married to the son of another chieftain of the same city. The groom's name was Vatsaraja. Twenty-two years of age, Vatsaraja was a good-looking and experienced young man. He had after a lot of pleasingly attentive and caring behaviour sweet-talked the much younger Sundari into having the pleasures of bed with him.

Sundari came to see her friend within two or three days of her wedding. As before Purukutsani was quickly into playing the rough and tumble that she used to engage herself in with Sundari. But Sundari wouldn't agree. "I'm married now," she said. "I can no longer have such girlish play."

"I'm married too!" said Purukutsani. She then enquired about the details of Sundari's marriage. Since Purukutsani was a close friend of hers, Sundari told her everything without holding anything back.

Purukutsani touched the inside of her thighs as if to check something. She realised that she still remained undeflowered.

Sundari had said during the course of the description of her married experience that she had to walk with a slight limp for a couple of days, but now the mind craved only that! These words left a deep impression on Purukutsani's mind.

A desire to mate dawned on her!

Sundari had also said: "He is on my mind, morning, noon and night. I have no interest in anything else. The mind doesn't hold on studies or games. He is my lord."

Sundari became pregnant in the next two or three months.

'When will I conceive?' thought Purukutsani to herself in some anxiety.

She sent two of her servant-maids to keep tabs on her husband. Accordingly they kept an eye on him.

Purukutsani came to know that women of easy virtue would walk into the king's room, mate with him and receive gifts from him before going back. This pushed her deeper into distress.

Purukutsani summoned her servants and sought advice.

"You are the queen," they suggested. "Courtesans entering the palace whittle away at your dignity and prestige. You should impose restrictions on their entrance. Chieftains supplying girls to the king must be leashed in. You should see that they do as you say."

A bubbly younger female slave proffered secretly: "I will arrange everything!"

She came over herself in the evening, sprinkled some powdered lotus on Purukutsani's tomboyish face, put on her a raiment of fine woven silk, did her hair before she stood holding a mirror against her face.

The queen took in several eyefuls of herself as she realised the charm of her looks had doubled because of her maidservant's efforts. Another of her servant's words appealed to her: "You have the first right over the king's bed. Establishing this depends only on you. You should meet the king in the bedroom as darkness falls. You should serve him, wheedle him, and bring him round. Seeing your good looks and craving physical intimacy with you, the king will come dancing and embrace you."

Pakshma, the dancer that Tarkshya had brought from Pataliputra, had put on her dancing gear and was waiting in the room off the bedroom. Pakshma had to put up a dance performance in front of the small assembly got together by some respectable men and trading chiefs who were close to the king. All were close friends. No one had any interest in the dance. Least of all, the king. To Tarkshya had fallen the task of taking the dancer straight to the king's bedroom as per the king's wish and of bundling the audience off, announcing,"Today's programme is deferred to tomorrow!"

A few guests were already seated in the audience-hall. The king was having his meal in his sleeping-apartment. Tarkshya sat by Pakshma wondering what would happen today in the royal bedroom. He had subtly hinted to her at this second probability. People who had heard of Pakshma's reputation as a dancer had arrived early and taken their seats, dying to see her dance.

At this time, striding briskly, Purukutsani walked toward the royal sleeping-abode.

The moment her eyes fell on Pakshma's outfit, she stepped into the outer room instead of entering the king's sleeping-apartment.

"Who are you?" she asked with some asperity.

As soon as Tarkshya saw Purukutsani, he quietly slipped out. Purukutsani didn't look his way.

From outside he gestured to Pakshma, the gesture saying: Come out fast. He hadn't thought about this contingency. This was a new experience for him.

Pakshma tried to get up. But Purukutsani, holding her by the scruff of her neck, sat her down.

"I am Pakshma. I have come here to dance in front of the assembly."

"Who brought you here?"

"One of your own men."

"Who was it?"

"Tarkshya!" she said. Hesitation rang out from every syllable.

Tarkshya was no stranger to Purukutsani. In a way he was one of her own people. He was a Naga Kshatriya who belonged to the bonded labour force serving her mother Bindumathidevi.

"I will tell him, you go away from here."

Pakshma wondered for a while whether to do as the queen said. What about the dance?, she asked herself. Pakshma's shoulder was still smarting in Purukutsani's powerful tight fist. Without another word she was on her way out. She didn't go into the assembly hall. Skirting around she exited.

Purukutsani, standing just where she stood, took control of herself choking down her anger. She took a look at herself in the mirror, and gently pressing back her forelocks, brought on an artificial smile.

She suddenly entered the royal sleeping-house.

The king was taking his meal right on the bed. The plate from which the king was eating had been placed on a low stool. A woman servant stood around with the food to be served.

The queen rushed up in a huff, and wrenching the ladle and the vessel from the servant's hands, commanded her to clear away.

The king looked on helplessly.

"Serving you food is my job. Eat well! Would you like some more *tovve* or *shreekhanda*? " asked Purukutsani as she placed the food and the vessel on the low wooden stool before she sat close to the king on the bed, the ladle in hand, ready to serve.

"You remembered me today?" the king asked, the word 'today' receiving sarcastic emphasis.

"Do you need only the dancers from Pataliputra, and no one else, to serve you food? Wouldn't it be tasty if I do the serving?"

"She came to dance, not to serve food."

"She will occupy my place on your bed."

"Won't you be happy if she does things that you can't?"

"No. From now on no one except me can share your bed."

We needn't worry about the details of what happened next. Only one word would do: He stopped his meal midway, pushed aside the eating plate, and covering himself with a bedsheet, lay down and slept.

Purukutsani lay by his side; that was about all....

The news of this incident spread through the length and breadth of the town.

It is true that Tarkshya told the assemblage: "Pardon us. There is no dance today." Tarkshya thought that it would end right there, with only the connoisseurs being disappointed. To his disappointment it didn't. This was not the first time that the programme had ended like this. Perhaps what followed after the programme abruptly ended happened for the first time:

Many aesthetes and connoisseurs saw the dancer Pakshmadevi seated among the guardsmen by the door. Although they knew that the dance programme had met its premature end because the danseuse had entered the royal sleeping-chamber, they gathered in a surprised circle around her. They asked her a volley of questions. She told them in rather elaborate detail about Purukutsani forbidding her.

Just then Tarkshya came looking for her. Placing a finger on his mouth he enjoined silence. Although she did stop midway all the respectable men and heavyweight traders had come to know that Purukutsani had driven away Tarkshya and her. Some men having an infatuate

passion for, and delighting in, the performing art of dance tried to arrange the dance at some other place. In his heart of hearts Tarkshya was not for this. But he couldn't say no because he had been affronted. Yet he took Pakshma aside and told her secretly:"Don't say anything." Then he left to head home. The contract was for one hundred *varahas*, but the dancer had to be content with the thirty *varahas* that the courtiers, nobles and the eminent merchants collected for the dance that day.

Word that Tarkshya shouldn't be paid anything against the hundred *varahas* that the king had ordered he should be rewarded with came from the queen the following day.

Tarkshya came over to the place Pakshma was camping at and assured her: "Don't worry. Stay on here for a few more days. A call from the king will come forth." He then left for home.

Tarkshya later came to know the idea behind sending word to the treasurer about the contract fees. Purukutsani's purpose was to goad Tarkshya, an admirer of the Naga people since the days of her mother, to see her, to win him over to her side. With no other way, Tarkshya met Purukutsani to talk about the contract of a hundred *varahas*.

Purukutsani refused on her life to give a hundred *varahas*. In Tarkshya's presence she told the bursar to give one *varaha*, sending a slip accordingly.

Coming to know of this, the town, down to the last man, thought highly of Purukutsani's stand.

Fed up seeing the state treasury being drained because of the king's thriftlessness, the treasurer was all praise too for the queen's posture.

Ayodhye was by no means an indigent country. Yet

men of importance and influence in the city, who had helplessly seen the king's contemptible actions, formed themselves into a small committee, saw the queen, and expressing their approval of her firm and thoughtful attitude, overflowed with unstinted praise for her.

Pakshma, who stayed on for four days, didn't get her hundred *varahas*. She helped herself to thirty more *varahas* giving two more private programmes. Devaraja the middle-aged widower father of Vatsaraja fell for her charms, spent two nights with her, gifted her ten *varahas* before returning gratified. Tarkshya began to avoid her. Besides, may be at Purukutsani's instance or because of their dislike of Tarkshya or of the town bigwigs' disdain, thirty to forty brats got together and enticed the horse of Devaraja's chariot standing by Pakshma's house with some feed, untethered it, and leading it away to another corner of the town, fastened it to a tree there. As it was a clandestine meeting, Devaraja hadn't brought along his charioteer. Devaraja came out in the small hours of the next morning and looked: his horse had vanished into thin air! He went near the chariot and looked: even the axle pins had disappeared.

Devaraja thought to himself: 'If only they had left behind the horse, taking the chariot away! ... I'd have got on and gotten home...' As he stood thinking, the sound of a chortle came from behind the wall. While he looked about in suspicion, his eyes fell on some writing that had been done on one of the walls of Pakshma's house. It was: 'Wedding-hall of Devaraja the old man and Pakshma'. The words had been written with the axle pins dipped in axle grease and a wash of vermilion and turmeric. The axle grease pot and the pins lay right there. The old man started

to wipe off the words with the small thin towelly cloth he always carried with him, the *angavastra*. From behind the wall some people caterwauled the paired names before running away. In their wake, some more brats screamed: 'Their Wedding Hall'. Then was heard the receding sound of the feet of people running away.

Devaraja completed his wiping work. Just then the clip-clop of a horse's running hooves was heard. Devaraja stood right in the middle of the street in the hope that it was his own horse. The man who had come was Veerasena the horseman on night vigil. Waving his *angavastra* like a flag, Devaraja the old fogey stopped the watchman, handed over ten *varahas* before saying, "Come to my place with the chariot and take away your horse!" He took the night watchman's horse and slunk off. Pondering over everything, the guardsman on horseback crowed to himself: So early in the morning I got some money! He then fixed the axle pins before lugging away the chariot. "Find my horse. It is the duty of the guardsmen to trace lost things. I will give you ten more *varahas*," said Devaraja achieving the airs of a chieftain. "Give me my horse. I will go about and look for your horse, sir", replied the watchman. He just wanted his horse back. Devaraja's worry was that if he gave back the horse, that action of his would dent his prestige. Even as he was saying, "Get me my horse first", he spotted Vatsaraja coming down from his upstairs-apartment. He didn't want his son to know about the sensual escapades and peccadilloes that he had indulged in with Pakshma. So he quickly bundled the guardsman off saying hurriedly, "The horse is tethered in the stable. Take it. If I don't get my horse by the evening, your job would be on the chopping block!"

Devaraja of course got his horse back but the smear campaign didn't end. Some more dissolute boys shouted some words slandering the old lover Devaraja in front of Pakshma's house. Pakshma's wish of staying on for four more days didn't come true. The other chieftains, leaders, women of easy virtue and men of consequence stopped visiting Pakshma because of the mud-slinging, muckraking game. There was no trace of Tarkshya.

Purukutsani learnt about the happenings in the town from Tarkshya himself, got on to her grand stately chariot, and descended at the house where Pakshma was camping along with two of her servants. She had the following said to Pakshma through her servants:"You have earned seventy *varahas* in our country. Our queen will give you thirty more *varahas*. She will also arrange for a chariot to take you up to the border. You should never again step into our country. If your presence is found out, you will be put to death, impaled with a sharp weapon. You should leave right away."

Pakshma's joy knew no bounds. She went over to pay the queen her respects. "I caused you mental pain," she said falling at the queen's feet. "I beg for the alms of your pardon." The queen took out thirty *varahas* from her moneybag, counted them, and pointed to the nondescript little soldier-chariot that stood behind before departing. The mass of humanity that witnessed this in broad daylight overflowed with ungrudging praise for the queen's munificence.

King Purukutsa had no royal presence to speak of. He was the king, yet didn't count as the king. The queen's influence on the other hand spread everywhere in the space just of three days. All officials, chieftains, leaders, the bigwigs of the town and pleasure-women available only to

highly placed dignitaries sang her praises. The reins of governance passed into Purukutsani's hands. Even Tarkshya was the king's close servant only on paper. He started to convey to the queen on the sly all the events happening at the king's place.

Queen Purukutsani won out in all respects except in one where a fret of acute disappointment troubled her. Although she tried for two successive weeks, her virginity remained intact.

Her only success was that she didn't allow any other woman access into the king's bedroom. Her great achievement was that she served the king food for fifteen days.

Purukutsa even told the queen once: "I was available to you once, but then bashing me you made me sleep in a corner. You suffer now. This is something that I can't do now!"

Such plain speaking reduced Purukutsani to frustration and she never again thought about it. She gave the king over as it were to Tarkshya. She detailed Kalia to serve the king. Tarkshya submitted a confidential report to her once in two days. She never again stepped into the royal bedroom.

Citizens complained that Tarkshya brought all the harlots of the town to the royal palace. Purukutsani who knew the two faces of Tarkshya didn't say anything. She asked her subjects themselves for suggestions.

"Former kings of Ayodhye went to the hut in the mango grove precisely for indulging themselves in sensual pleasure. Citizens thus didn't know about the king's indulgences. Such lowly things happening in the royal palace cause popular reproach and accusation. The practice of women, who are available to be bedded, spending time

in the king's abode is an insult to the state and its citizenry. This said, if you have other ideas it is up to you!" said the team of citizens.

The queen felt that the situation had got out of hand. It was clear as daylight that the citizens had come to know about the fiasco that their private life as husband and wife had ended up as. She felt no stab of anger. Her mind however had gone bitter. She knew that her mother Bindumathidevi had opposed their marriage. But what could be done?,she asked herself in a wordless inner debate. There is no going back now. I should forge ahead, take a step forward.... Who would look after the citizens if His Excellency starts living in the mango grove?

A middle-aged madcap did come up with what was there for all to see: "Her Excellency is as much an authority as the king, capable, charismatic and influential."

The queen didn't want to hear words of such crystalline clarity. These were of course words one agreed heartily with! But speech shouldn't stoop to give this kind of direct ingenuous denotation. The queen nodded. "Your Imperial Majesty may pardon the words of such insolent men among us," rejoined an experienced trading chief, who had understood the subtlety of the queen's gesticulated idea, just to play down the unequivocal clarity in the middle-aged man's remarks."Our intention is not to separate the king from the queen. Many Ayodhye kings have been pleasure-craving, dallying sensualists. That is in point of fact a feature of royalty. We are worried only about the recognition that the women that the king dallies with get and its public consequences. Our queen should think of a way out. Instances where such women win the confidence of the king and end up replacing the queen have

recently proliferated. Our wish is that such a situation shouldn't be the lot of Ayodhye. His Excellency the king could, as the occasion arises and as he pleases, visit the garden once in a fortnight or in a month to rest and relax. He could have pleasure-girls of his choice come there. He may then come back to Ayodhye to govern. After all, the mango grove isn't far from Ayodhye.It is just a *gaavuda* away. In emergent contingencies he could come over for a night or two and stay at the palace. In his absence we will assume the mantle of combat guardsmen and protect the state."

The queen had to say something decisive to this.

Yet without arriving at any decision she said no more than: "I have to think about it. Give me some time." The talk with the queen, it seemed to the immature, was of no avail. But for the experienced trading chief and the experienced profligate Devaraja who had saved his face by the skin of his teeth, the queen's silent nod of the head was enough. They felt their mission was indeed successful. They had realised in fifteen days how ruthlessly dutiful the queen was. It was Tarkshya that the queen called immediately. Tarkshya's pride had nose-dived the moment he learnt that a delegation of citizens had an audience with the queen to complain to her about him. He came trembling to the queen, and as he prostrated in front of her, simpered, "Please protect me!"

"Get up, you crazy fellow! I have no time to console you. Two things have to be done by you. One: You go to the king and praise Pakshmadevi to the skies before him. Say that she is great in bed. The king might ask you as to how you know. You tell him that Devaraja and the other honorable men told you. The king is still smitten with her.

He is unhappy that he didn't get what he should have. He pitches into me because of that. The second thing you have to do is you should quickly bring her so he could bed her!"

Tarkshya stood looking in saucer-eyed and wide-mouthed surprise. What is the queen upto?, he wondered wordlessly. She is playing around with people.

"You have ordered that in case Pakshma comes back to Ayodhye, she be killed. What if she is scared to come...."

"Who asked you to bring her to Ayodhye? You should bring her to the mango grove. You should let her sit in a hut and then take the king over. You should let the king satiate himself before bringing him back to Ayodhye."

The queen's eyes glazed over with tears as she said to herself: I have to play the pimp for my own husband's prostitute!

Tarkshya stood looking down at the floor. He was in a fret of unease and embarrassment. He was after all the queen's clansman. "In case the king refuses to come?..." he stammered.

A white heat of anger burnt up in the queen. "I have set you this task. You should worry about how to go about it. Now get going. You have been given eight days to do this." The queen then strode briskly in. She didn't forget to give Pakshma her signet ring and the moneybag of hundred *varahas* that was due to Pakshma. Tarkshya heaved a sigh before leaning back against a pillar.

The chariot took Pakshma up to the Nandi village. There the road divides into two, Tarkshya found himself saying in an inner monologue, one fork leading to the woods and the other to Shravasti through a couple of villages. Pakshma, the city-dweller that she is, couldn't have taken the first path. She might well have taken the

fork leading to Shravasti and reached Shravasti after going past a couple of villages: Shravasti is a pretty big town. One could hire a chariot to go onward either to Kashi or Pataliputra. When she was brought to Ayodhye, they had camped for a day at the house of the withered old woman who plays host to travellers. I might get to know the tidings if I first meet the old woman. I should go quickly. But when Pakshma is brought, the chariot should be swathed with a screen so that there is no room for suspicion. The guards should be shown the signet ring and told the following: The woman inside is the queen's friend.

Before I leave, I should, thought Tarkshya in conclusion, see the king and ask him how he would like it if Pakshma the dancer was brought now into the mango grove.

The second job came about smoothly.

As soon as Tarkshya's horse stopped by in front of the king's sleeping-abode, Kalia came running, and saying, "Where have you been? The king has been wanting to see you since morning", took him in holding him by the hand.

Although the queen had stopped coming to see the king only for the last five days, the king had gone without a woman for twenty days. Having heard about the petition of the citizens, Tarkshya had disappeared into the house of a friend of his. Only the queen knew about his being holed up there. The moment Tarkshya stepped in, the king flew off the handle as he bellowed, "Where on earth did you go, you swine!? "

"You should save your servant, My Worshipful Majesty!", bleated Tarkshya as he lay prostrate holding tight His Highness's legs.

"What happened?"

"The mayor also plotted to take me by force and make me out as the guilty before Her Majesty. They think bringing female artists to the palace is an affront to the citizens! I hid away."

"Who said that?" The king's voice quavered, suggesting that the king had understood the drift of Tarkshya's words. Wrath wrestled with indecision in the king's poser.

Tarkshya was a clever chap. He didn't bother to answer the question. Instead he laid out his premeditated plan:

"My Imperial Majesty! Your elders of three generations ago have had a pleasure-house built in the mango grove just for amorous pastimes. The women who come there to afford sensual pleasure are blabbermouths. They increase their fees by describing the king's visit to their customers. Mriganayane's fee is now raised to twenty *varahas*. Let them fill their bellies. But I am really vexed when they talk so lightly about the king."

Tarkshya had thus wreaked vengeance on Mriganayane. Mriganayane hadn't paid him the hush money that was due to him.

"You are also talking like those citizens, aren't you?"

"No, Your Worshipful Majesty! I am still unhappy about the fact that Pakshma's visit has been cut short. If Your Excellency desires to have her in the mango orchard, I will bring her here."

"It was you who said that the queen had banished her from town."

"Yes. But she couldn't have gone far. I will bring her secretly, so secretly that even the queen wouldn't come to know."

"In that case I will go over to the mango grove this very day."

"Not today, Your Excellency! I will search for her and bring her over."

It was clear that the king himself was enthusiastic about going to the mango garden. Three or four days would be necessary to search out Pakshma. Tarkshya placed before the king his problem of what arrangement he would have to make for his amusement and entertainment till Pakshma was found.

"No, I will go this very day," the king tossed in reply, a mild testiness in it. "Let us not talk about Mriganayani who betrayed our trust. Send Shashanki. You don't disappear for ages, understand?"

Tarkshya was delighted as both of his jobs had been done. He conveyed the tidings to the queen, saw Shashanki, appointed a gendarme to take her to the king before leaving that very night on horseback to Madhuvana in search of Pakshma.

Just as he thought, Pakshma had stayed in Madhuvana, the village located on the border of the kingdom of Shravasti. The withered old woman hosting travellers herself cooked and served her both the meals of the day. Madraka, a big cultured husbandman, was her man, her master on contract for a month. He had provided provisions for the house, as much as would be sufficient for a whole month. She had put down stakes in his lane.

Tarkshya didn't go straight to Pakshma's house. He gave as many as five *varahas* to the old woman before sending her to fetch Pakshma telling her to tell Pakshma that a customer had come.

Pakshma turned up. Perplexed to see Tarkshya, she

tried to run off. The ancient woman however had closed the entrance door.

Pakshma had to listen to Tarkshya.

Tarkshya said only what was advisable to say. He explained that the queen herself had agreed to this, that the mango grove was not Ayodhye, that her body wouldn't be put to any sexual violence, that King Purukutsa was longing ardently to see her and that she would be borne in a covered chariot.

"I am now Madraka's slave. I can't stir from here for a month," asserted Pakshma.

"The king has sent your fees," said Tarkshya, putting an oblong moneybag of a hundred *varahas* and a coconut, some betel leaves and areca nuts on a silver platter, and placing it at her feet. "May the god of love testify that I am not a liar." He then went on to salute the moneybag, his hands folded like lotus-calyx in front of his chest.

"We could talk about it later. Madraka should agree to this first of all. I am not a petty whore soliciting in a sleazy Pataliputra bylane. I am an artist. We have our ethics too."

"Pakshma! I am the king's envoy. I have placed before you His Excellency's desire. Forget about whatever has happened. I have handed over the money that was due to you as per the contract. I will meet Madraka if necessary. But I can't talk insultingly about the king: I am here as the king's servant. Sage Vatsayana in his *Kamashastra* has said that one should tell whatever lies are necessary to achieve sexual union. Is it appropriate to bring in the king of Ayodhye in the context of a rustic like Madraka? Tell me."

Tarkshya told her the phoney scheme that he had already dreamt up, and got her approval for it. He had her accept the moneybag before sending her away.

It is not known whether or not Pakshma was wholly,

zealously devoted to truth and rectitude. During the two or three days of Madraka's company, a new worry had arisen in her mind. Madraka was then sixty years old. He was muscular and well built. The chances of her figure losing shape because of Madraka's handling were quite high: her dancing vocation warranted a shapely figure. Madraka didn't know the A B C of dancing. His young children were skilled Mridanga and Veena players. During a dance she performed, they had provided the musical accompaniment, and it was quite competent. She gave herself over to Madraka, not with any willing celerity but rather as a gesture of gratitude, situated as she was in straitened circumstances and also out of appreciation of his children's musical virtuosity. Her feeling was that the time spent in the royal bed would be several notches better than the time spent in physical contact with a farmer. His Excellency wouldn't handle her in the boorish and bone-headed way that Madraka did. So thought Pakshma. In the sexual encounters that she had had thus far, no king had taken on her body with such violently gut-busting passion as Madraka had.

Tarkshya went to Pakshma's house in the evening before Madraka got home and sat in the outer courtyard. As if as a witness to her vow being not broken, Pakshma had closed the door and secured its inner bolt even before Tarkshya arrived.

"Do protect me!" exclaimed Tarkshya animatedly, as he rose with dignity bringing his open palms together in front of his chest in salutation as soon as Madraka entered.

"What trouble has befallen you, fellow?" asked Madraka.

Tarkshya quietly pointed to the door that Pakshma had bolted closed.

"What?" posed Madraka at a loss for the meaning of Tarkshya's gesture.

"Pakshmadevi is saying she is under the obligation of a contract of a month with you. My master Devaraja, the nobleman is asking what happened to the promise that he was given. I have been sent from Ayodhye. I am at a loss. If I go empty-handed, my head will roll. I have come here to ask you for the alms of my life. You do whatever you want: give me life or death!"

"Who is Devaraja? Do you mean the eldest son of Nobleman Dharmaraja?"

"Yes, Madraka! Devaraja the son of the king of just laws and equitable government who conquered this land for you to till! Kingdoms fall or are taken away. But only the practice of agriculture stays on. What do you say?"

"Devaraja was only thirteen years of age when I was fifteen years old. We used to play the game of the-house-of-sparrows on the banks of the Ganga."

"Devaraja still remembers it."

"What is the promise?"

"Pakshmadevi won the hearts of the connoisseurs of Ayodhye. Devaraja fell for her charms and having obtained a promise to be with him for a fortnight, he got her to stay in the spacious and fully decorated lodging of his palace. Within two days of her sojourn descended Sage Kavasa, the great grandson of Sage Durvasa to stay in Devaraja the nobleman's palace for three days. His great grandfather's propensity for self-mortifying austerities, though not his anger, has come down in full measure to Kavasa. Frightened by the unexpected arrival of Sage Kavasa, Devaraja told Pakshma to go away for three days. Her pride dented Pakshma immediately left Ayodhye and has come to

Shravasti. If Sage Kavasa had any claim to fame, it was certainly not for his control over the senses. What if seeing Pakshma, desire stirs in him? It would be a misfortune even if it doesn't. God save us if he gets irritated and wrathful seeing that a Kshatriya of his own clan was lustful! It is a situation of the devil and the deep blue sea..."

Pakshma Devi who had been listening to these words from inside slammed the door open and came out shouting, "Is this justice? Does this conform to the law of virtue?"

"Shush!" breathed Madraka placing his finger on his mouth.

Another thought of his own was bugging Madraka. It was that if any of the Shravasti soldiers or royal servants got to know that the most famous dancer of Pataliputra was Madraka's keep, this would certainly reach the king, and the king would punish him on some pretext or other, and Pakshma would then join the royal employ. There was no doubt about this. It was precisely for this reason that he had kept Pakshma in the house, which stood hidden as it were behind his granary. He had decided that he would take Pakshma to the king himself and offer her as a gift if someday their pitched liaison came to light and as a consequence the royal soldiers besieged his house. Madraka had all along said to himself, 'Why should I lust after dancing wenches? The labourer women picking paddy plants and weeding his fields would suffice!' Pakshma's body had peaked to youthful perfection. He only desired to suck up its warm-blooded succulence as long as he could access it.

At Madraka's instance the three of them walked into the house. Madraka spoke up himself. "Look, girl!" he said. "Do you know Sage Kavasa's capabilities? If he gets

angry, he can reduce a mileful of a crop of wheat to ashes merely by looking at it. It was Devaraja's elders who donated me land. I will not forget their help. The capacity to bring you here and keep you as my mistress accrued to me because of him."

"You don't think about me, do you? Where in a town like Ayodhye would people like me spend three days? Did you give this a thought? I had promised. It is against our work ethics to go elsewhere after having promised somebody. Not seeing any other way out, I gave up and quit Ayodhye! The good fortune of being in Ayodhye didn't fall to my share, it seemed to me!"

"Ayodhye is now right at your feet, isn't it?" submitted Tarkshya.

Anyhow Pakshmadevi agreed to come to Ayodhye on one condition: "The food provisions given to me by Madraka should be kept in the house that I am staying in now,"she had said. "No other woman should come and stay in it. I will stay in Ayodhye for thirteen days and come back to stay here!"

A doubt made its way into Madraka's mind. Stroking his grey hair, he asked,"What is the reason behind a woman like you coming to someone like me?"

"Pakshmadevi is a woman of her word," Tarkshya butted in. "It is the professional ethics, the prescribed duty of women of easy virtue to act according to their promise!"

Madraka then laid out his inner hesitation. His worry was that he had to inevitably give Pakshma over to the king in case the royal soldiers got to know about her presence there.

This perked up Pakshma further. Disguising her newfound enthusiasm she tossed back, "You are now

giving me over to Devaraja the nobleman. Afterwards you may give me over to His Excellency of Shravasti. But I am promise-bound to be obsequious, to act obediently to someone else's will. That is our professional ethics. My deliverance is in the implementation of this behavioral code. I will act according to the ethical code laid down by my mother. When such an ethical code guards me, there is nothing that Sage Kavasa can possibly do to me!"

Goodwill and affection invaded Madraka's chest and flooded upwards at this display of a sense of righteous conduct. He embraced Pakshma right in front of Tarkshya so tight that Pakshma's bones nearly gave way. Wriggling out of his hold with great effort, Pakshma offered: "Let me kindly have the opportunity of being at your service tonight!"

His own indiscretion quickly dawned on Madraka. Moving away, he rapped out, "You, who are the wife of my bread-giver, is like my mother. Girl! Devaraja is waiting for you. Making him wait is improper on my part. You bundle up your clothes and stuff and leave immediately. There is a bye-path from here to the village, which is on the banks of Sarayu. I will come upto a point to see you off. My responsibility ends once we cross the Shravasti border. Get along and get ready!" Saying this Madraka took Tarkshya and walked out.

Pakshmadevi, who had considered both the possibilities, had already packed up the things she needed the most in a bundle. She now tied up clothes and other things of daily use in another bundle. The experienced traveller that she was, she tied the two bundles into a long bag in such a way that the two bundles would straddle the saddle in a state of balance.

Outside, Tarkshya discussed the rules and regulations that the Shravasti king went by, and the main turns and forks of the unknown shortcut to Nandi village. By then the withered old woman playing host brought even the night meal bundled up in small mud-pots. Pakshma was on the point of giving the old woman one *varaha* when Tarkshya rose quickly to count ten *varahas* into her hand even as he said,"This is the *raja's* gift to you...."

"Which *raja's*?" asked a dubious Madraka.

"Deva-raja's... Who else's?" said Tarkshya as he rather indolently and carelessly took the two bundles in Pakshma's hand and tying them up to the cotton-cloth saddle, left them dangling on either side of the horse. Pakshma clambered on to the horse with the bundle of food.

"Tell me, boy! How did you find this house?" Madraka asked.

"She will tell you," replied Tarkshya pointing to the old hostess.

"Hang on, I will get my horse to show you the way." Madraka ran upto his house.

Seeing Madraka make tracks, Tarkshya quietly got on to his horse and gave it a powerful poke in the stomach.

Breaking into a gallop, the horse dashed into the growing lush green crop in the fields.

"Should have waited till the old man came!" chattered Pakshma.

"In sexual love, even a lie is fair!" gurgled Tarkshya.

Her sensuality aroused on the way by the sound of the horse's hooves, Pakshmarani heaved a weighty sigh before winding her arms around Tarkshya's neck and trying to kiss

him.

"Pakshma!" said Tarkshya. "I am a man versed in the science of sexual love, not a lustful character. People lusting after women are boneheads. Let us meet independently and mate when you are done with all your amorous play. You will then experience real sexual love. You are now the king's property. I should not be engaged in coition with you. It would be illegitimate."

Although this was true, it was nonetheless a falsehood of sorts. Tarkshya was taking Pakshma on the queen's orders and His Highness's lustful desire was irrelevant here.

The queen's idea behind this was an unresolved puzzle for Tarkshya.

3

Tarkshya showed the chief police officer of Nandi village the queen's signet ring, had Pakshma sit in a screen-covered chariot, and along with a horseman, travelled towards Ayodhye. The chariot went straight upto the mango grove. Pakshma was put up in a hut. The king bade Shashanki goodbye that very day. The binge of amorous enjoyment and love-play of King Purukutsa and Pakshmadevi flowed uninterrupted and unimpeded for ten days.

As soon as Tarkshya entrusted Pakshma to the king, he came back to Ayodhye for some much-needed rest. He reported every little detail of what transpired to the queen.

The king had gone to the mango grove of his own accord. But the rumour that the queen was angry with the king and had sent him off to the mango garden spread

thickly among the citizens. The queen had already kept the reins of governance firmly in her hands. Now she came to be known as a woman fond of and devoted zealously to her citizens. This legitimized the power she had taken away from the king. She was now the virtual ruler of Ayodhye.

But who on earth has plumbed the depths of a woman's heart?

Was her leadership restricted to securing the compliance of the bureaucracy? Did this mean that she had achieved supremacy and power over persons of prestige and influence in the kingdom?

The amorous play of the king and Pakshmadevi was one week old. The queen came to know through her servants the news of the skilled Pakshma affording sweetly aching pleasure to every cell of the king's body. The young queen went green with jealousy. However she didn't show it outwardly. Only she touched her thighs to remind herself of her virginity that was still intact.

She sent for Veerasena the horseman who had saved Devaraja's face sometime back.

He came and stood dutifully, having performed his due homage to the queen.

"You saved Devaraja from being affronted the other day. What reward did you get for it?"

It was against administrative rules for him to have given Devaraja the watch-horse. Without letting that on, Veerasena submitted: "Ten *varahas*, Your Royal Ladyship!"

"Just ten *varahas*?!" returned Queen Narmada Purukutsani, a pungent edge to her voice.

"He asked for the horse. He rewarded me with ten *varahas*."

"Twenty *varahas* in all, wasn't it?"

Veerasena was bewildered. How is it that all such details reached the queen's ears? Veerasena asked himself in a silent aside."He asked for the horse. I made a mistake, My Imperial Excellency!"

"It wasn't a mistake to have given the watch-horse for two hours to safeguard the honour of a royal personage. How much more did you want?"

"I went to him asking for the horse. He said,"Search for my horse and bring it to me. I will then give you ten *varahas*." Does what he said accord with the conduct befitting a royal personage, Your Majesty?"

"What he said is unjust to you. Besides I think twenty *varahas* is too low an amount. Do you want to earn still more?"

It didn't immediately strike Veerasena why the queen said twenty *varahas* amounted to injustice. At a loss what to say, he blurted, "One wants as much as God gives, Your Excellency!"

"What you did with Devaraja was only conduct normally not permitted but which is allowed in exceptional circumstances, the *aapaddharma*. It was in a way your duty too. But you should present Devaraja with an offering of pleasure. You come and tell me what he rewards you with then."

"What is the pleasure-gift that Devaraja desires which I could offer him?"

"Look! He enjoyed Pakhma Devi's* intimate company only for two days. News has come that Pakhmarani is

* 'Pakhma' is the Prakrit form of 'Pakhshma'. People used only Prakrit those days. Sanskrit came later.

camping hereabouts these days. Devaraja is a widower. He would jump with joy if he came to know this. Conveying it to him depends on you..." Her Excellency laid out details. She also told Veerasena how to go about conveying this to Devaraja. She however didn't let on the fact that Pakshmarani was now with His Excellency the king.

"If he offers you twenty *varahas*," Purukutsani went on, "don't accept it. Come over and tell me secretly how much he offered to give. I will give you your due. Let there be a test of the royal personage's generosity!"

Having been resentful about Devaraja's behaviour, Veerasena used this golden opportunity well. He went over to Devaraja's abode, and said: "I have a secret to tell you. I am sure of your generosity of suitably rewarding me if it pleases you."

Taking the hint from Veerasena's eye-, hand- and mouth-gestures, Devaraja took Veerasena into a secret chamber, telling the watch and ward staff not to let anyone inside.

Veerasena told him that he saw Pakshmadevi picking flowers near a hut in the mango grove and that the moment she saw him, she ran off in like a frightened deer.

Devaraja the nobleman didn't believe this initially. How did Pakshma make bold to step into the kingdom, he found himself saying soundlessly, after having been excommunicated by the queen? Devaraja knew that His Excellency was in the mango grove. Could it be that His Excellency used his powers to get Pakshma back? Is the king's influence then greater than the queen's? Or is it all Tarkshya's sleight of hand? Can I with the help of the tidings get Tarkshya into the queen's bad books and get into the queen's good books myself? Shambling in the

perplexed expanse of such thoughts, Devaraja retreated into silence.

"Are you not happy with the news, My Master?" Veerasena asked as he gawked.

"All right. Let's see. I will think about it. You come tomorrow."

Veerasena didn't move. The nobleman handed him a *varaha* most unwillingly and sent him off.

Devaraja, a widower for the last five years, lacked domestic happiness. He had assumed an attitude of ascetic renunciation in the initial years of his widowhood and taken up the discipleship of Sage Kavasa. Of late however he was thinking of marrying again. His son's wife Sundari, pregnant, was nearly full-term. Devaraja had suddenly developed concern about his son's child that was about to emerge from the womb of time. There was wrangling at home in the last one month. "I arranged your marriage. Now you do something about my single status!" the father requested the son. Vatsaraja strongly resisted Devaraja's second marriage. After the kingdom of Shravasti hived off, the nobleman's family had been dispossessed of quite a bit of its property wrecking it financially. When one of Devaraja's maid-slaves conceived, her parents grabbed some of Devaraja's land dangling over him the threat of petitioning the body of elder citizens. Vatsaraja had opposed this too. But he didn't pursue it for fear of losing face.

Devaraja didn't sleep a wink that night. The more he thought about it, the more did Pakshma's beauty haunt him. There is no political mileage for me in this no matter what happens, he told himself, getting into a cud-chewing session. Her Excellency is envious of Pakshma. Can I beg her to let me look after Pakshma without letting the king

know about it, can I thus have the ban on Pakshma lifted? There seems to be no reason why Her Excellency should not agree to this. Whatever the case, whatever happens, a desire to see Pakshma once stirred in him. I did the right thing, he concluded, by asking Veerasena to call at his place the following day.

When Veerasena turned up the following day, Devaraja gave him twenty *varahas*. At about 3 o' clock the next morning, he went walking to the hut near the mango grove, disguised. He had Veerasena sit outside before entering the hut. Pakshma, who was doing her hair, was taken by surprise. Devaraja took off his artificial beard and moustache before falling prostrate in front of the dancing wench and begging for the alms of the pleasure of amorous play. He reminded her of how he had sheltered her when Pakshma was helplessly miserable in Ayodhye. He promised that he would persuade the queen and obtain an amnesty. In case that turned out to be impossible, he promised to arrange for her to live an opulent and lavish life in a village close to Ayodhye. He also recalled for her the two days the two had spent together.

Just then there was some noise outside.

Devaraja put on his beard and moustache in a hurry.

Ten Ayodhye soldiers on vigil duty had laid siege to the hut. They took Pakshma and Devaraja into their possession, tied them up separately to seats in a screen-swathed chariot before driving the chariot towards Ayodhye. Nobody spoke a word.

They were made to sit separately in the stable behind the palace. They sat for nearly three hours in helpless silence. Then Devaraja was taken in his disguise into the cellar below the queen's chamber under cover.

The queen was there all by herself, standing. There were no servants, waiting on. The guardsmen came only upto the door.

"Devaraja! Take off the beard and moustache and come!"

Taking off the beard and moustache, Devaraja flung them away before falling in humble submission at her feet, prostrate, the open palms of his outstretched hands touching each other and his whole frame, straight as a stick, touching the ground.

"I am without doubt guilty to the core, Your Royal Ladyship! Please do pardon me."

"It is all right, Devaraja! You only did what every man would. Do you remember that your daughter-in-law is my good friend."

"Yes, Your Worshipful Majesty! At least for her sake, you should..."

"I had sent Veerasena to you myself just to test your generosity. What reward did you give him?"

"I gave him twenty *varahas*...."

"One *varaha* for the news, twenty *varahas* for coming along and showing you the way, ten *varahas* for the watch-horse, ten *varahas* for lugging your chariot. Isn't it? If royal personages behave so stingily, what would happen to the honour and prestige of the royalty? How much did you pay for Pakshma's friendship of two days?"

"Ten *varahas*, Your Excellency!"

"Is the price of your taste for the good things of life only this much?"

"After the Shravasti kings took possession of four of Ayodhye's villages, our family lost half of its property," the

nobleman returned quietly, wringing his hands defensively. "I am now more indigent than even the sons of Ayodhye's merchants."

"Do you know the king of Shravasti?"

"Subhanu the present king of Shravasti was my boyhood friend."

"Did he lust after women the way you do?"

"Yes, My Empress!" softpedalled Devaraja, swallowing the affront.

"Will he give us back our four villages if we give Pakshma over?"

"We will have to ask and see, Your Serene Majesty!"

"Will you then work out such an agreement?"

"If you so wish..."

"What is your wish? That is the land that your elders acquired. If it comes back to Ayodhye, you will benefit too, with your property doubling, won't you? When our elders were suffering from some physical affliction, the hamlet that lies on the far side of the Sarayu River was neglected with the result that the new Shravasti kings took possession of it. You who were the governor slept over it. That you didn't send the army over in time was your mistake. The hamlet is no longer with Ayodhye. Its farmers are now enjoying themselves, using its resources and not having any attendant responsibilities. They pay the tribute neither to Ayodhye nor to Shravasti. They give it to the village chief. And the headman gobbles it up himself. Shravasti does not as yet have full control over the people there. The harvested crop is sold right in Ayodhye. They come here filling their boats with goods. They take back our *varahas*, this is their means of subsistence...."

"Yes, Your Worshipful Majesty! Even today they are living on what Ayodhye gives them."

"Our elders were lazybones. You sing Pakshma's praises before Subhanu. If she agrees, you get her to dance in front of the royal assemblage. If she doesn't, you set off a revolution going to villages and pepping up the farmers. Our army will stand ready for the battle in the Nandi village. It will rush forth the moment it hears the news of the revolution. But I heartily wish that the truce proposed between you and Pakshma will succeed... It is better to avert the war. Convince our friend Subhanu. Let us know the results of your agreement. You are good at describing feminine beauty, it comes easily to you. I am not skilled in it. When will you leave?"

"Tomorrow!"

"Do you remember your boyhood friend Madraka?"

"Yes, I do, Your Royal Ladyship! He sees me sometimes when he visits Ayodhye to sell grains and other wares."

"You stop by Madhuvana and see Madraka before meeting Subhanu. He knows Pakshma. You shouldn't let Subhanu know about it though. Seeing Pakshma into Madraka's place is my job. You should tell him that if the agreement is not successful, he will have to get some farmers together and, clobbering the Shravasti soldiers, drive them out of the village. You should also assure them that our army is standing by in the Nandi village. You could then see Subhanu. Is that all right?"

"All right, Mahadevi!"

Devaraju had without his knowing addressed Purukutsani as Mahadevi 'the great among great women' (literally, 'supreme goddess'), and this came to stay as her permanent name.

"All right, then... Don't go dressed in such shoddy

clothes. In the adjacent room are the robes of honour and the attire of a royal representative, which you could wear. You set off in a joyful frame of mind. Don't talk to anyone about the task assigned. You may now leave."

Satisfied, the nobleman bent down and touched the queen's feet before taking leave.

4

The queen fell into a meditation for a few minutes.

That Devaraja went out wearing long loose robes of honour was signalled by the tinkle of the anklets that had been tied to the door.

The queen quickly rose to send for Tarkshya.

As soon as Tarkshya appeared, she sent him scurrying to the mango grove with some news. The news was that an unknown horseman saw Pakshma come to the mango orchard before threatening to arrest her. Climbing onto a horse, Pakshma fled the kingdom. Nobody knew where she went. Assuring the king that she would make an alternative arrangement, the queen requested him to wait. After Tarkshya went off carrying these cooked up tidings, the queen asked Pakshma in.

The queen suppressed her jealousy effortfully till Pakshma came into the room, and when Pakshma did appear before her, she stood with a synthetic smile playing on her face.

A white heat of fury flaming in her, and smug and proud in the belief that she had the upper hand in matters relating to men, Pakshma came and stood, stiff and resentful.

"The queen doesn't like me to live;" she hollered, giving the queen a wide-eyed glare. "I'd sooner die than live with fear and worry like I'm doing. Please put me to death. This is my prayer."

The queen walked up two steps, embraced Pakshma before kissing her. Then she said, "Sit!" pointing to a seat.

By then Pakshma's anger had simmered down. Her legs had gone weary and weak, standing as she had in the stable for such a long time. "Why the kiss now?" she asked, her question full of unfeeling and suggestive bite as she flopped down on the seat.

"Are you unhappy that I stole my husband's kisses from your cheeks?" asked the queen. The queen's reaction was totally unexpected. Pakshma didn't feel like saying anything by way of a reply. She felt overcome and defeated.

"Vouchsafe me the alms of death!" was all she said.

"That is not in my hands. It is the king who gives such alms; it is within the jurisdiction of his powers. My powers are there only as long as they are effective. When you were in Devaraja's guesthouse, I sent for you just to frighten you. It is upto you to be frightened or not to be frightened. Supposing you had said, "The queen is nobody to mete out punishment to me. I have come here to afford the king pleasure", what would be left of my authority? But you did as I said just for a gift of thirty *varahas*, didn't you? You sold off your own freedom, didn't you? What is my mistake in this?"

"The king got me to go to him saying I would be given a hundred *varahas*...."

"You have been given your hundred *varahas* in Madhuvana. You have got a hundred *varahas* in Ayodhye.

For the amorous pleasure you gave the king for ten days, you will get a hundred more *varahas*....How much did Devaraja give you? Ten for the sexual love of two days! You will get double this as fees from His Worshipful Majesty. But you shouldn't wherever you go spread word that the people of Ayodhye lack any feeling for the finer things of life."

"I don't go about reviling people of one place in another. That is against our work ethic, our code of conduct!"

"I am saying this precisely because you feel bound by such a code and ethic. How many days are left as per your contract with Madraka?"

"Twenty eight. Twenty five days would be left if you count the days I danced in his place."

"I am going to send you to Madraka's place. He might on his own send you to Subhanu, the Shravasti king. In case he does, would you be happy?"

"Yes."

"Making people happy is the duty of the king. You don't have to worry about you being put to death. You should spend tonight in the palace and leave for Madhuvana tomorrow. I will send a screen-covered chariot for you, Stay happy!"

Pakshma straightened up, and suddenly getting up, fell at Her Excellency's feet as beautiful as lotus. She kissed the royal feet. Feeling as the queen did a stab of sympathy, tears welled up into her eyes.

"Get up, take your meal. Tarkshya will come tonight and carry out his promise to you. Is that all right?"

"Your Worshipful Majesty!" gushed Pakshma."You are

veritably the wife of the god of love!"

The queen realized that she had lost out. However she didn't give up on the honour of regal duty.

"You rest in this very room. Your meal will come right here."

5

That night Tarkshya paid the retaining-fee, homing in on Pakshma till an immensely gratified "Enough, I'm done!" tripped off her tongue.

He got up early the next morning, took Pakshma, honourably, in a veiled chariot to Madhuvana to leave her in Madraka's possession. "Your boyhood friend Devaraja will come here this afternoon," he said to Madraka as he was leaving. "Don't tell him right away that Pakshma is here. Devaraja will leave for Shravasti to see King Subhanu. You could tell him after he returns from Shravasti" Tarkshya went back to Ayodhye.

The agreement that Devaraja was to achieve came through. Devaraja gave Pakshma over to Subhanu and, armed with a written official document of authority that enshrined the terms of agreement, came to the four villages that were now a part of the kingdom of Ayodhye. He organized a meeting of the farmers and headmen in which he collected as tribute half the amount that the headmen had got together, appointed twenty horsemen for each village from among the gendarmes that gathered at the Nandi village. He then returned to Ayodhye on a trail of glory. The five hundred soldiers who had billeted in the woods around Nandi disbanded without a sound.

Ayodhye was abuzz with a bustling zest, a festive fervour. No one knew what in fact happened. All every person knew was that the four villages that originally belonged to the kingdom of Ayodhye, but had been annexed by Shravasti, had returned to Ayodhye.

6

The fret of a fresh trouble now plagued Tarkshya.

The news of Pakshma's flight didn't evoke any waves of dislike and anger in His Excellency, True. But the king was far from being satiated although he had sexual love for as long as ten days. "Tarkshya! I need to get married!" was all he said.

How should I reply to this, wondered Tarkshya.

He didn't have the courage to report the king's desire to the queen.

His Worshipful Majesty laid out his demand again the following day. Tarkshya felt a mite of comfort when the king explained what he had in mind: he had been fed up with old "overripe" women. The bug of deflowering fresh, not-yet-bedded girls had bitten him.

Village after village, town after town was combed for children of older pleasure-women who were young virgins. None however was there to be had.

There were to be sure some from high-class families. Negotiations done here and there to procure them failed. There were poor people in Ayodhye but none, who had heard about the type of sex that the king was known for, was prepared to submit their girls to that hellish suffering.

The only way out then was to meet the woodsmen of

Naga families. For that one had to travel a long distance north of Ayodhye.

King Purukutsa's carnal craving exceeded the limits. He started to threaten to dismiss Tarkshya from service.

Tarkshya who was a secret servant of queen Purukutsani was in distress. Fleeing the place was a possible solution. That however seemed a hard decision to make for Tarkshya since he had warmed to the queen because of the semi-political tasks she had set him from time to time.

Requesting leave from the king as well as the queen on the ground of going home to his native place for a week, he set off in the direction of North Kosala. He didn't return for ten days.

7

"Kalia! Did Tarkshya come?"

This outcry issuing from the king's mouth, which had begun on the fifth day, flowed uninterrupted for five long days.

Kalia was fed up to his back teeth answering, "Not yet."

In the evening of the tenth day Kalia heard a horse arrive.

Kalia ran out, thinking that it was Tarkshya who had come.

It was not however Tarkshya who had arrived, but an unknown horseman.

There was a long sack tied to the front part of the horse's back, which was veiled by a blanket.

Calling out to Kalia the horseman had him come close, then asked him to hold the reins fast. Noticing that the stranger had addressed him as 'Kalia', Kalia stepped up and

and stood holding the reins. The horseman got off the horse effortfully, put the long sack on his shoulder, and then asked, "Where is His Excellency?"

From inside the sack issued a continuous low opium-intoxicated moan.

Kalia tethered the horse to a tree hurriedly before he came over to take the horseman.

The horseman walked in even as he asked Kalia not to go in.

"May His Majesty please listen to this! Tarkshya has sent this offering. The intoxication of opium has not yet worn off. Shall I lay her down here?"

"Lay her down on the bed."

The horseman took off the blanket that the thirteen-year-old girl was enveloped in before he set her down on the bed.

"Where is Tarkshya?"

"He will reach here tomorrow. He is injured in the leg. He is resting after traversing a distance of four *krosụs*. May His Majesty please pardon me for being late. Shall I go and bring him?"

"You leave."

"By your order, My Lord!" The horseman came out. "You stay right here," he said, staring at Kalia, and mounting the horse, set off.

The following day Kalia got up, went over to the king's bed and lifting the girl in his arms, brought her out. She was a small girl. For some unknown reason Kalia felt uneasy in his mind. In the dim light the feeling that he knew her came over Tarkshya.

The girl was not fully awake.

Kalia lay her down on the narrow bench in the front verandah. Her hair had sprawled on her face.

Brushing the hair aside, Kalia took an intent look at the girl.

Who should she be but his own sister, Nagia!

He went in, got a thick silk sheet and covered her with it. He started fanning her. A storm of fury erupted in his innards. Such a violent tempest that he felt like storming in and stabbing the king with a knife. He however choked down his anger.

If he did go in and stab His Highness, there would have been a rumpus, and the watchmen would have flounced in. What would be Nagia's lot then...? Kalia wondered.

Nagia began to breathe freely and normally.

She might wake up in an hour or so. If he could get a horse, he could hit a bye path for two *haradaris*.

Outside only one vigilman was awake. The other five were asleep.

Kalia addressed the vigilman: "His Worshipful Majesty has asked me to bring Tarkshya."

"If I go who would keep vigil here?"

"I will wake up Vaijanatha. You leave!"

"Where is Tarkshya?"

"He is in his house in Ayodhye"

The watchman got on his horse and rode in the direction of Ayodhye, even as he saw Kalia walk toward the sleeping Vaijanatha.

Kalia however didn't wake up Vaijanatha. Vaijanatha's horse had been tethered to a tree nearby. Kalia untied it quietly before leading it to the entrance-door of the house

in the mango orchard. Lifting and carrying Nagia, Kalia put her down on the horse's shoulder, then held the bridle with the same hand before he climbed on to the horse.

He let the horse walk till he was out of the orchard through its back entrance. Into the woodlands now, he had the horse walk a few paces before he pulled at the bridle. The horse began to run nicely.

Kalia scuffed the horse's left shoulder with its mane once, which set the horse galloping.

8

Did His Majesty Purukutsa mate with the girl that day?

His eyes wide and rolling upwards, the king dragged his feet to the girl with his vessel of wine.

The intoxication of opium hadn't worn off. She was still moaning indistinctly now and again.

His Excellency sat right there and looked at her, pop-eyed.

The girl was of course pretty.

But...

She had all the signs of a Naga maiden: necklaces of black beads, a brass amulet with the Naga signet on it, the black string on the hand, tattoo on the chin...

As the king took an intent look, the feeling that it was a familiar face descended over him. Where have I seen her face, he asked himself wordlessly. His Majesty found himself in a fret of frustrated exertion as he jogged his memory, trying to place her.

Yes! He told himself, falling into a meditation. Wasn't Kalia like her when he joined his employ? Could she be

Kalia's younger sister?

The locution 'younger sister' touched off a tidal wave of disgust in the king. Disgust about his own self, about his bad fortune, about Kalia, about this girl. About his own self more than anything else.

What kind of a science of the mind is this? Can language symbols work such magic?, the king found himself saying to himself before perorating: I don't know.

His Majesty stalked over to the bathroom and threw up.

9

The horse that Kalia rode out on was a fine one, quick and nippy. Even such a horse took so long to reach Kalia's birth-village Amaru that it was noon the following day when it got to the place.

Kalia's father Vasuki and mother Bhogia were in a fret, worried over their missing daughter. They sat without taking even their meals. They knew that Nagia was caught filching guava in the guava orchard. The big-bodied Vasuki dragged the gardener off to his place and gave him a good thrashing. "It is true that Nagia came to steal guava. We gave her a guava to eat, and were sitting cross-legged inside to take our meals. She had disappeared by the time we came out. We didn't bother further thinking that she must have gone back home. Or else we had indeed thought of bringing her to you to complain!" submitted Sukhia, the gardener. Sukhia was into ripe old age. Vasuki had nothing to say against Sukhia's words. Yet unable to choke down his anger, he had fallen on Sukhia, and twisting his arm, punched him. Sukhia's wife complained to the village

headman. It became known that a horseman riding with a blanket-swathed bundle crossed the path of two unknown travellers. Seeing that a leg dangled from the bundle, they tried to stop the horseman in his tracks. They couldn't however succeed in their attempt since the horseman put on a sudden spurt. The village chief got village elders together. They had to send a report to the king. A controversy about which king to report to erupted.

The village of Amaru was situated on the border. No one in the village knew which kingdom it belonged to. Some argued their village was a part of the kingdom of Kashi, some said their king was the king of Ayodhye, some others claimed their allegiance was to the king of Nepal! The police chief of the village was a loyalist of the Kashi king. He walked out of the meeting. "It is our king who will do well by us," suggested an elderly man. "I can not say that the Ayodhye king is a good man, but if you want your work done, you will do well to go to the Great Empress, our Mahadevi!" Vasuki didn't come to the meeting. He mounted his horse and knocked about a few villages. He was to turn to go to an unknown village when he heard the clip-clop of a horse in the woodlands. He took up a staff and stood behind a tree, poised for an attack. Just as he recognised Kalia, he threw down the stick, dismounted from the horse and hurried off even as he called out, "Kalia!"

"What is it?" asked the clever Kalia.

"Your sister...!" stammered Vasuki.

"Nagia is here!" Kalia got off the horse.

Nagia sat right behind him. She had come out of the spell of intoxication. Her hair done neatly, she sat as if nothing had happened. "Nagia...!" vociferated Vasuki as he

helped her dismount and hugged her. "Where had you been, girl!" he wailed.

"When I reached the wooded area hitting the bypath after leaving the guava garden, I lost my way, father. I don't know how worried you have been," Nagia rapped out, speaking just as her elder brother had instructed her to speak.

Vasuki came home to his village in a mental elation of joy, with his daughter seated on his horse, and his son in tow. The village womenfolk waved a platter of flaming camphor downwards in front of Nagia, and drew off the bad effects of the evil eye that might have fallen on Nagia by applying a circlet, on her face, of the black juice of the marking-nut. That episode had ended there, but Bhogia the old woman was not satisfied.

It was the great patriarchal sage Vamadeva who had developed the guava garden. He had now retired to the Himalayas to practise self-mortifying austerities and do penance. He had left his disciple Sage Devadema to tend the orchard. Bhogia went to visit His Worship the sage along with her son, her daughter and husband. She offered the sage a coconut, a couple of bananas and a few camphor crystals.

Devadema was a great ascetic, a seer who knew the past, the present and the future. No praise was too high for him.

The great sage didn't look at anyone. Instead he threw a look at the sky before uttering a loud booming laugh.

Wearing a solemn expression on his face, he then rattled off mantras like 'asyamava devasya'.

He ran his eyes over Nagia from top to toe just once, then asked, "I am sure you haven't lost the

mantra-consecrated amulet that I gave you, have you?" Holding up the amulet dangling on her neck, Nagia showed it to the sage. His Worship then started putting questions to Kalia.

"Look, Kalia! We are Nagas, followers of Atharvanaveda. God has vouchsafed us all the skills and arts: spells and devices, snake poison antidote, the knowledge of medicine, the wealth of physical health...He has given us everything except one. What is it? Tell me."

"I don't know, my Great Teacher! You are omniscient. May you please tell me."

"I will. Listen! The only thing He didn't give us was the art of living."

"We live well – strong, well-fed, well-nourished... Don't we, my Great Teacher?"

"Listen! Your father allowed himself to be agitated and distracted, and without thinking about the possible consequences, gave the aged gardener Sukhia a hiding. Can we call this the art of living?"

Then Vasuki let on:"My mind had gone bitter, my patience had worn thin, My Worship. It was a slip-up."

"Don't worry, I am here! I am not an Atharvavedi, I swear, if Sukhia doesn't get well in the next three days. Now, you and Kalia left your village to go to Ayodhye. There you got an unworthy master to serve, is that right?"

Kalia didn't in his heart of hearts want to continue the dialogue on this topic. "That is right, My Worship!" he breathed, wanting to end it right there.

"Now you, the mother!" His Worship the sage said addressing Bhogia."Excuse my saying this. There is a sacrificial ritual, mentioned in the Rigveda, performed

when girls attain puberty. Did you do it when Nagia came round?"

"No, we didn't. Are the followers of Atharvanaveda entitled to observe it?" It was Vasuki who interposed.

"Why not? Did not all the Vedas issue from the same Brahma? If you had performed that sacrifice, the awareness that she was not just a girl, but a nubile virgin would have dawned on her. She would also have known then that she should not climb a tree. All these sacrificial rituals, vows and religious rules turn the mind towards an awareness of the body, making it do things appropriate to the age. Isn't that so, Vasuki? How old are you?"

"I don't remember, Your Worship!"

"You are fifty eight," the ascetic renunciate declared, holding Vasuki's fingers in his hand and touching the fingernails."A sacrificial rite marking the attainment of sixty years must be held in two years. Do you understand? Let that be. I will turn now to astrology. I will do some computation and tell you what evil stars exerted their influence to cause the trouble that Nagia got into."

The patriarchal sage had a vesselful of mud brought before spending some time doing some computing. While he was revealing the direction in which Nagia had gone missing, Kalia was spotted scuffing the floor with his toes out of an impatient fear. To ask more details was improper, it seemed to the sage. He stopped his calculation midway, and directing his sublime inner vision skywards, said airily but importantly, "Something like the word, 'gwa' is echoing in my innards."

"That is it, My Supreme Worship! That's it...It was in a guava garden that Nagia went missing, wasn't it? What you said is bang on target!"

Looking at Kalia His Worship the ascetic beamed a smile. Then he picked a lovely guava fruit from a tree in the orchard, and put it along with some consecrated turmeric-stained, water-soaked whole grains of rice, the *akshate* into Nagia's saree-end before declaring, "There is no reason for fear, my girl! Your marriage will come about in six months." Thus ending the question of the day, he rose.

Every one returned home in a cheerful mood. Kalia however saw unnamed hidden meanings in the sage's smile. "He knows everything but didn't say everything, which is our good fortune!" he said to himself in a wordless aside.

10

Tarkshya had betrayed his own people. He was of Naga stock. So were the king and the queen. The misdeed he had perpetrated to satisfy the king's new greed began to gnaw away at the central core of his being. This was precisely why he had arranged to transport the girl to the mango orchard through a horseman. In addition he felt like seeing Nagia on the way, just to see if the opium was still effective. Mukhiya the horseman who was with him had fed Nagia with an eatable mixing a special, powerfully intoxicating opium. With his help Tarkshya laid her down on the ground, and opened her eyes. Her eyeballs were still blue. That her face resembled Kalia was the cause of Tarkshya's worry. "Be it what it might, it is now too late. I can't be witness to the sin. The news must reach the queen," Tarkshya said to himself in worried brooding, and entrusting Nagia to Mukhia, travelled to Ayodhye to

convey the news to the queen. He couldn't summon the courage to use the words that the king had used. He nonetheless subtly sketched for her His Majesty's newfound lubricious longing. He also told her about his futile attempts to talk the king out of it.

"Why didn't you tell me about it earlier?" asked the queen, not letting other fledgling words tumble off her tongue.

The thought struck her in a trice, but disappeared without a trace in the light of the power of His Highness. The thought was: Why shouldn't I go in disguise, wearing a different hairdo, and feeding the king opium, satisfy my longing? If she said it, however, indicating to Tarkshya the fact of her virginity would have been inevitable. 'Let them think what they will; I shouldn't blab things' was the decision she ended up taking.

Tarkshya laid out his doubts in clear terms. Before making tracks for home, he said no more than: "In case the girl brought is in fact Kalia's daughter, the problems that it would give rise to would be many."

When the mounted vigilman came the following morning to call him, Tarkshya asked, a bit thickly, " Why did you give up vigil and come away?" Then he rushed to the mango grove along with him.

The birds had already left their nests.

His Highness, having had no sleep the whole night, was still sleeping.

"When His Majesty wakes up, tell him that I had come to call on him!" said Tarkshya before making a dash to the queen to report to her the happenings.

"Your Majesty! Kalia has disappeared. So has the girl. This is my carelessness! a slip-up! The writ on my forehead!" he rumbled out in great fury, beating his forehead.

"What is the slip-up?"

"How on earth can I show my face to my people when I go back to the village?"

"Calm down! Let us have time to think.Which is Kalia's village, do you remember?"

"Amaru."

11

Sage Devadema had laid down that questions were not to be asked on Tuesdays. That was a Tuesday. There would therefore be no people that day to ask questions. Kalia came that very day to the hermitage.

"I have come for a discussion of a question of right and wrong. Not for asking astrological questions!" said Kalia before nudging aside the disciple who stood by the door and walking in.

The *pooje* that the sage was performing was nearing its end. He waved a censer of flaming camphor crystals before God Naga, placed in front of it an oblation of milk, thus ending the *pooje*. He then proceeded quietly to hand Kalia the sacred ritual water and a part of the *prasada**.

"What is your question relating to the law of the right and the wrong, the *dharma*?"

"Supposing a sage is unworthy, is it unrighteous to give up on him, and to start serving another?"

"I see the context of your question, Son! The one you wish to serve is coming right here on Thursday morning.

* *prasada*, pronounced *prasaada*, is whatever food is offered to the deity which is then given to the devotee to eat as a demonstration of the devotee's inferiority and total surrender.

But your seeing him is a function of your purity and goodhood. It is a matter of your own decision!"

Kalia felt his legs giving way. "Today is Tuesday, Your Worship!" he said, biting at his fingers in embarassment."I have heard you don't answer questions on Tuesdays. You favoured me with an answer; I am beholden!"

"Whether I did you a favour or not depends on your resolve."

"Why do you say that, Your Worship!?"

"You have been a silent witness to others' misdeeds. Your mind has turned fickle. You will stand to benefit if you take refuge in the soul that is inside it. If you stand around observing the myriad ways of the mind, things could happen any which way. The mind has no constraining rules. It is a matter of destiny. If the way you choose among hundreds of ways of the mind sits well with the voice of the inner soul, you might even court success. But several other ways of the mind could even ruin you!"

"How did Your Honour read the question arising in my mind?'

"With the purity of the inner soul! Inner souls keep sending messages to other inner souls. Only, the reader has to have a pure consciousness, that's all!"

"Can one read the inner soul on Tuesdays also?"

"Why not? The very fact that you came over to ask questions on a Tuesday breaching a rule of the hermitage says that the intended question had to do with the inner soul. Any day would be fine if the question relates to the inner soul."

"What is the difference between a question of Astrology and one of the inner soul?"

"Astrology is a branch of learning. You can tell its results by following its rules. It doesn't cost much effort or exertion. One could tell the future of twenty people in a day through astrology. But the question to do with the inner soul is different. One has to first of all enter the inner soul, learn its declivities. Having traversed its expanse one should step out to strike out along the lines of possibilities or impossibilities that the future holds. One could enter the inner souls of two or three in a day. I can't do more. My teacher Sage Vamadeva doesn't have this problem. His very words become the future of people. People know from experience that their future happens along the lines of his words. In fact the sage can effortlessly talk about future happenings."

"This means that destiny is predetermined, doesn't it?"

"Yes. The most important events of life are predetermined. The effort that goes into making them happen looks spectacular to onlookers because of the possibilities and outcomes, desirable or undesirable, that a situation is pregnant with. For the man experiencing it, it looks like ups and downs. Take for example your own case. You had a cruel experience last week. Things that disturb the mind are altogether different from events that leave behind everlasting dents on the inner soul. What you experienced was predetermined. If you take a holistic look at your life, you may well realize the probability of this severe jolt. Man however forgets about human probability, and looking at life in bits and pieces, views individual events in isolation. The result is an optical illusion. One feels that in order that the drama of life goes on, one needs the partial light that torches afford in darkness. For clean pure souls with straight steady intellects, everything is clear. There is no element of surprise for them."

"Oh, my Great Lord! You removed the web on my eye!"

"You don't have just one web on your eye, Kalia! May God give you good sense! May the pus of the wounds of your mind not percolate down to your inner soul! You may go!"

Kalia had some more definite questions to ask. He however didn't do any more asking as the definitive word had come. "Walking with a veil covering my face is my lot!" sighed Kalia before joining his open palms in front of his chest in salutation, and left.

If he was intelligent, he could have asked the question, "What should I do?" It was because Arjuna was intelligent that he made the following request to Lord Krishna, "Please tell me decisively which will benefit me the most." But the education and the culture obtaining those days hadn't reached this level. There were ascetic renunciates and sages who had achieved fulfilling perfection, all right. But the commoners hadn't reached the level required to take full advantage of them. The phantasmic illusion called 'wonder' that would test the teacher's power still veiled Kalia's mind.

12

Even if of a young age, a servant who knew all the secrets of the king and the queen running away and turning into a foe didn't look good to the queen. She thought she would be doing her familial duty if she went over to Amaru village, met Sage Devadema and purified the idol of Goddess Avantikadevi with a ceremonial bath. Accordingly, she arrived at Amaru at about two o' clock on Thursday. She visited the idol and offered worship. Then,

wearing a white saree, the saree-end reverentially put over her head, she walked over to the hermitage to see the sage.

Sage Devadema welcomed the queen, who was a disciple of Sage Vamadeva, with great respect, care and attention. Sending out all of his disciples, he told Her Highness secretly: "You have been successful so far. You should now be careful about the probability of an enemy incursion. You have nothing to worry about: even if a bit difficult initially, the ship of the state will sail ashore only because of your efforts."

Her Majesty was astonished.

"Your Holiness should bless me! Please perform whatever ritual sacrifice is required for overcoming difficulties. I am still a child."

All right. I will start the sacrificial ritual propitiating Goddess Cha(mu)ndi, the hundred-*chandi* sacrifice this very day. No one can erase whatever is the writ of fate. Only, the happenings decreed by fate could be made bearable. Don't you worry! The favour of compassion of the elderly and the holy would always be with you," intoned the ascetic before going in. Coming back with betel leaves, areca nuts and a coconut, he placed them before her. Her Highness placed five hundred *varahas* on the betel leaves before proceeding to give it to the sage. His Holiness wouldn't however have it. "I don't touch gold," he said, shrinking back. "There is a smartha Brahmin, a shastri of my clan. You can give it to him."

"My desire is that Your Holiness should wear the holy wristlet yourself and pour offerings into the sacrificial fire."

"All right. The betel leaf is there for it. You should hand the money over to the shastri."

As per the ascetic renunciate's enjoinder Nagesh

Shastri turned up. "There is increasing fear of theft these days," he said dubiously the moment he saw the moneybag.

"I will arrange vigil," assured the queen before she handed the betel leaves and nuts, the consecrated rice-grains and a *dhotra* to the sage, and the money-bag to Nagesh Shastri. Then paying her homage with an humble prostration of her body, she left.

Kalia was not to be seen in the assemblage of people.

Her Majesty stayed back for two days declaring that the ritual purification of Goddess Avantikadevi's idol by a ceremonial bath be done on Friday.

Kalia didn't show up to meet Her Highness.

After the worship on Friday, Her Serene Majesty on her own asked someone to go over and enquire about Kalia and his family.

The village headman reported that the Kalias had gone the previous day over to a neighbouring village to see an ailing kinsman.

"There is an enemy born right here. Destiny suggests no way out," said the queen to herself before she got her open palms together again in salutation to the goddess. Appointing two guardsmen to keep vigil at Sage Devadema's hermitage, she saw the sage over again before performing the salutation done as one takes leave.

"May you beget male progeny!" blessed the sage in response to the salutation.

Realising her own situation, the queen felt the sage's blessing was an empty formality. She took leave giving a slight smile.

As she left Amaru in her chariot on Friday evening, the queen said to herself in a wordless monologue: "May you

beget male progeny!" Is this a genuine blessing or a blessing meant just to please barren women?'

Her Highness's mind began to wander. An amused wry smile came on too.

As soon as the queen reached the palace, she reflected deeply on the question of the invasion.

13

Kalia, a sixteen-year-old boy from Tanki village who had joined the employ of the palace in Ayodhye because he was of Naga stock, had attained a maturity that was far beyond his years. He had also developed an ambition way beyond his age. These had their roots in the nature of his job.

He had seen Purukutsani become an all-powerful queen from close quarters. This was the reason for the respect and high esteem in which he held the queen. He had disgust for King Purukutsa. Especially the incident that had recently come about had sparked furious anger in him. Vicious spite had welled up in him for Tarkshya who was in fact the reason behind the incident. He was dying to wreak vengeance.

His great ambition was to become a nobleman by working his way into the position of confidence with the queen that Tarkshya had occupied. This he wanted to do by going to Ayodhye in disguise and reporting to the queen Tarkshya's misdeed. He had great faith in Her Highness's sense of justice and fairplay. Both Her Majesty and me have been wronged, he told himself wordlessly. If we work in tandem, to topple the Tarkshya-king combine wouldn't be difficult.

For him Tarkshya was no more than a servant who procured for the king his pleasure-women. He didn't realise that pimping for the king was but one of his many faces.

His devotion to His Holiness Devadema the spiritual master was tremendous. But his was an unripe immature age. He fought shy of asking, "What shall I do?" He suppressed his desires. It was only on Thursday that he came to know that Her Excellency was showing up on Wednesday.

He didn't know that the amulet His Worship had given his sister would accomplish such a big thing.

Tarkshya had seen that amulet when on the way he got her down from the horse to check if the intoxication had worn off. From her looks Tarkshya had reasoned that she could be Kalia's sister. He remained silent, bold in the belief that the amulet, which had Sage Devadema's sign on it, would protect her. How would Kalia know about it?

His Majesty recognised the amulet too. Although he didn't have a clear idea of the 'guru's sister', 'the great sister', the sister under the guru's protective eye, he did suspect that she could be Kalia's younger sister. That very word had sparked waves of disgust in him. Kalia didn't know all this. All he knew was that his sister had escaped a disaster for some reason.

Kalia grew agitated when he got to know that Her Majesty was to visit Amaru.

Kalia didn't like easy pyrrhic victories. This was part of his nature.

He was fond of achieving things that were difficult to achieve, the fascination, as the great Yeats said, of what is difficult. He was successful in rescuing and bringing back

his sister. Serving the king had cheesed him off, because it was easy. Had Her Majesty not come to Amaru, he could have done the arduous tasks of a secret tryst with the queen, of complaining to her, of getting Tarkshya punished etc. Since the queen was coming right there, meeting her secretly seemed more difficult than he thought.

Her Serene Majesty's secret agents might now be engaged in searching for me, Kalia thought, musing. *How can I travel in disguise? I need a horse. They might catch me, recognising the horse. The queen may not trust me. She might repose her faith in Tarkshya. Telling her some lie, Tarkshya might have already poisoned her mind. The queen is at the same time a sister and a queen to His Majesty. Just trusting the Naga blood may not be sufficient for her. Tarkshya is a Naga too. What will I have achieved if after taking the trouble of going all the way there, I have to rot in a prison?* Provoking him as they did, such tumultous issues dimmed the sage's words of wisdom. He sat under a *ghante* tree, and mulling over them for a while, arrived at a decision.

The following day was a Wednesday. Having had his meal, Kalia went out. When he came back he told his father that a snake had bitten his uncle living in the village of Tanki, that his condition was critical and that this he was informed by a Tanki villager. The whole household sobbed its heart out, and hitching up a steer-cart, travelled to Tanki. When they were about to reach the village, Kalia told them that there was to nothing to worry. Uncle had sent for them because he had seen the sight of two crows copulating. Everyone heaved a sigh of relief. Although so many of them had come, uncle Dakhiya welcomed them heartily, meeting them as they entered the village. He took them

home saying, "You have all come! Please stay for a couple of days. I did hear of Nagia losing her way and going missing. In fact I was going to come over to your village."

There was this menace of a leopard in the Tanki village. The young bucks of the village would go in groups with cudgels, dirks, bows, arrows and axes to hunt down the leopard. It took as long as a week for the leopard to be captured. Old but sturdily built Vasuki perked up too out of a passion for hunting. Kalia got to make friends with ten or fifteen boys. Their friendship strengthened and firmed up in the spurt of enthusiasm stirred up by the hunting expeditions.

On the seventh day, the leopard was sleeping having killed and eaten up a goat. Kalia was into the misadventure of catching the beast alive by throwing a net over the sleeping animal and tying it to a tree. With this he suddenly attained the status of a smalltime leader among a number of neighbouring villages.

14

Thinking about a possible attack by the enemy, morning, noon and night, Her Excellency Purukutsani devised her own policy of action. Ayodhye was a small kingdom. The crux of Purukutsani's policy was Ayodhye should be friends with the small neighbouring kingdoms like Shravasti, Gaya, Kashi, and Kamakhya. This was a diametrically opposite policy to Kautilyayin doctrine of the polity that was to come thousands of years later.

To begin with, a pretext was needed. Fortunately the Bhillas living on the banks of the Sarayu river attacked Shravasti in waves and began to kill and loot. Advancing

the argument that the Bhillas might well attack Ayodhye as well, Queen Purukutsani sent a contingent of five hundred soldiers to Shravasti's rescue. She on her part started to put together weaponry. The fire-pits of the town's blacksmiths became a beehive of activity. Swords, spears and flattened hatchets got made. Besides sentinels, the queen sent secret armies to man strategic places. She drafted fresh youth into the army.

The treasurer complained that all this was a strain on the state treasury.

Precisely at that time a messenger showed up to tell the queen: "Your Majestic Ladyship! Our commander who went to Shravasti has something to report to you."

Her Majesty sent off the treasurer and asked the messenger to stay right there before having the sentinel keeping guard outside walk a little way off.

"What is the news?"

"Along with his salutation of a prostrate body lying straight as a stick, our general has sent the report that our troops have achieved a tremendous victory, and captured a hundred Bhillas. But..."

"But what?"

"The Bhillas' leader has given us the slip. He and seven other men have escaped into the woods along with the gold and precious stones that they had looted in Shravasti so far. This information came out when we punished and interrogated them. The main booty has made its way into the jungle. Our soldiers could comb the forest and nab them. We will have to send them in small groups of ten each. In case we hand the arrested Bhillas over to the king of Shravasti, their death is certain. The commander suggests that we should hold the threat of death over them

and tonsuring them, drive them off to the open plains. He has sought Your Highness's orders."

"Why is that?"

"A hundred Bhilla soldiers can negotiate the wooded terrain much better than our soldiers. Even if they are tied up in a particular place, they can escape. The general does not like to send our troops in small splinter groups for a search in the woods. Can we surrender them to the Shravasti king?"

"We will do neither. Our army should go neither to Shravasti nor to the Sharabha forest. They should come to the Nandi village from wherever they are, pitch their tents and rest there. Barring four of their leaders, the other prisoners of war should be handcuffed and brought here along with the army. Their leaders should be treated with honour. Four of their leaders should be left behind at Nandi for the night. Instruct fifty of our intelligence personnel to keep tabs on them. Even if these Bhilla leaders are left free, our guardsmen, unseen, should keep an eye on them! Do you remember everything? Don't tell anyone. You have your meal and return."

Sahadeva Naika the messenger nodded his head in spontaneous appreciation of the wisdom of Her Excellency's message before hurriedly mounting his horse. He didn't stay to eat his meal. He made as if he went in to the kitchen, just drank some milk and left. A report about Sahadeva went to the queen from the kitchen.

Her Imperial Majesty was pleased. She was nevertheless not fully satisfied. She sent for Devaraja the nobleman, enjoining his immediate presence before her.

"Do Madraka's people know the Sharabha jungle well?" she asked as soon as the nobleman turned up.

"Yes, they do, Your Royal Ladyship!"

"You should go to the Madhuvana village taking fifty soldiers along. Taking as many farmers as you could, enter the Sharabha woods through the western direction. Seven Bhilla leaders are holed up in the jungle along with their king. They must be captured and brought to Ayodhye. There may not be any outcry about it. All right?"

"All right, My Empress!"

"You leave now."

A wave of disgust flared in Her Highness's heart at Devaraja's lustfully waddling gait. She called him back.

"Will you also take your son Vatsaraja along?"

Being wise to the suggestive note in her voice, Devaraja said, "Yes, Your Excellency!"

"In that case let him be the commander of the fifty soldiers. Give him appropriate instructions. After you reach the Sharabha jungle, you travel from there to Shravasti and inform King Subhanu that the Bhilla troops that raided his kingdom from the south had disbanded and that the south was now clear."

"All right, Your Royal Ladyship!"

Devaraja left. The queen had at one stroke brought down Devaraja and elevated Vatsaraja to the rank of a commander. She had also afforded Devaraja a golden opportunity of meeting Pakshmarani.

15

Saying they would go to see Ayodhye, a group of twenty-five young bucks from the villages of Amaru and Tanki hitched up two steer-carts after about fifteen days after the harvest. After travelling a *krosu* they got down

from the carts, piled the carts with the cudgels, clubs, swords, bows and arrows that had been hidden away in bushes. Their leader was Kalia the hero who had earlier captured a leopard alive.

He knew that there would be a vigil of only six men in the mango orchard during daytime. In the night there would be only one awake, and the rest would sleep, keeping aside their weapons. One would keep vigil for three hours before waking up the next one.

Kalia had told his friends in advance about what was to be done. Sneaking in quietly, they were to snatch away the weaponry of the sleeping watchmen. They were to then take the horse belonging to the wakeful gendarme some way off and tether it to a tree before meeting him. In the threatening presence of a sword, which the watchman should be shown, he should be disarmed before being bound with a rope. Next the servant inside should be hacked to death. Then...

The plan of action had been prepared well in advance. Kalia had determined the respective positions of individuals, doodling it on the ground and explained who was to attack whom. Kalia's plan was flawless. He himself had assumed the special responsibility of stabbing the king.

Off the jungle behind the mango grove, they unhitched the carts, and spread some feed in front of the bullocks before tethering them. Then they set off on foot to cross the jungle. Along with their weapons, they carried a staff and a torch with them. Holding a torch himself, Kalia led from the front showing the rest of the lot the way. The others mutely followed him.

They might have reached the middle of the forest when Tarkshya's loud and harsh shout sailed across from upon a

tree: "Kalia! Stay where you are. This arrow is trained right on your chest."

Kalia thudded to a halt, his courage rapidly draining away. His companions were on the point of running helter skelter when Tarkshya's voice jangled again: "Tell your followers to stay wherever they are. There are soldiers perched on thirty trees behind you. If your companions try to flee, my soldiers' arrows may also skewer their chests.. Ask them to put away their clubs, spears and swords at the foot of that neem tree over there."

Helpless, Kalia collected his men's weapons himself and put them at the foot of the neem tree.

Some thirty men, who jumped down from trees, hemmed in Kalia and his men. Kalia, who bent down to put down the weaponry, took out the dagger that was tucked at the waist and flew at Tarkshya. A staff hit his right wrist from behind, felling the dagger that was in his hand. Kalia sagged to the ground, rubbing his right hand.

Veerasena who sat hidden behind a tree submitted, "One more sword has to come!"

"Here you are!" announced a warrior bringing out a sword, which had been flung in a bush. Kalia's ploy had thus been nipped in a trice. Everyone was arrested. Leaving twenty horsemen behind, Tarkshya followed a bye path to Ayodhye with ten troopers armed with bows, arrows and swords in tow.

Kalia's men spent the whole night in the prison.

16

Kalia was produced before Her Majesty the next morning. His right hand was swathed with an overcloth.

Kalia didn't bother to make his obeisance to the queen. Instead he simply stood, stiff and silent, fixing the queen with a cruel I-don't-care look which said: 'Let me see what punishment she metes out to me.'

It was Her Excellency herself who spoke up first: "How could this be, Kalia! We came ourselves all the way to Amaru to see your parents. But we couldn't. Where did you hide them away?"

Kalia melted rapidly at the mention of the word *parents.* He felt a dart of regret at not salutating the queen. Yet he didn't shed his haughty airs while he said: "We learnt that uncle had been bitten by a snake. So we all went to Tanki."

"It seems you caught a leopard alive in Tanki!"

"Yes! I did."

"Bravo! We are Nagas, always valiant and heroic, aren't we?" There was no mention yet of treachery. In response to the queen's question, Kalia nodded his head, the nod saying: *Yes*

"Acharya Devadema has begun a hundred-*chandi* sacrifice in Amaru for the welfare of our kingdom. There was the menace of thieves there, said Nagesh Shastri. I have kept two horsemen there. Your friends are brave too. Can we form a muster of your friends and have you as their commander?"

What game is this?, an intrigued Kalia asked himself wordlessly. *A troop of traitors? She is talking about the*

position of a commander for me, who is a traitor! Everything seems queer. Yet, making his obeisance with a low bow, Kalia said, "We can, Your Royal Ladyship!"

"Before that we should have a test that establishes your leadership. Ayodhye's soldiers are valiant too. But they have little or no experience in jungle combat and in scouring the forest. The Ayodhyeyin army has defeated the Bhilla troops, which attacked Shravasti. But their king, along with six of his troopers, is holed up in the Sharabha woods. Your Naga friends don't know the topography of the Sharabha jungle. Besides you are injured. Even then, I am setting you and your men the task of scouring out the woods and arresting all the seven of them. If you pass this test, I will appoint you as the commander in Amaru. Is that all right?"

Such hard tasks were precisely what Kalia had wanted and sought. His eyes glistened with moist emotion.

"All right, Your Excellency! But what about my crime?"

"What is your crime? You have been provoked into an indiscretion by the offence against your sister," the queen tossed back. "That is not a crime. If you had seen me and told me about it when I visited your village, this wouldn't have happened. Why talk about it now? You explain in detail what has to be done now to your men. Nagas are a valiant lot. Getting provoked is their nature. You have an opportunity to use it pleasantly. It is up to you to use it!"

Kalia walked back to the prison, breaking into a long spasm of pleased laughter. He told his companions everything that Her Excellency had told him. His associates indeed thought that it was Kalia's victory! They exulted boisterously.

As per Her Majesty's orders, he and his men had their meal, got bows, arrows and other weaponry besides rottis that would do for a week before they followed the bypath into the Sharabha woods on foot, entering it through the north.

17

As per Madraka's suggestion, Vatsaraja fettered the wooded part in the north to keep the Bhilla king from fleeing. Shrewd as he was, he had arranged the deployment of his troops in such a way that the small group of Bhillas had to per force end up in Amaru. The Sarayu river would block their path there. Sailors couldn't possibly get the heavy loot across the river. Kalia's idea was that the Bhillas' flight to freedom would end there.

Kalia's group benefited immensely from this. It recognised the marks of human footsteps, the spit of chewed up betel quids and areca nuts and of the place where horses had grazed. It zeroed in on the place the Bhillas had sat before pitching camp and resting closeby.

In the small hours of the following morning, Kalia met the Bhillas even as they were sleeping. They were handcuffed even before they got up. No one was injured. Kalia piled their bag and baggage on them before he had them walk along the shallow waters of the narrow mouth of the Sarayu river. They thus reached the Hasti village. He hired four bullock-carts there, and reaching Ayodhye in one and half days through a bypath, delivered the prisoners and all the weapons and stuff over to Her Excellency.

"Was there a scuffle or a fight?" asked the queen. "No", replied Kalia. "No occasion for a scuffle arose."

Kalia got the long loose robes from the queen and left for Amaru along with his companions.

Shortening and tightening his circle of soldiers three *gavudas* a day, Vatsaraja homed in on the Bhillas' camp, bold in the belief that the Bhillas wouldn't run away. What did he get? As his misfortune had it, there were only the earthen dishes that the Bhillas had cooked their food in, an earthen vessel full of water, betel leaf and nut-stained spit, torn, tattered clothes and odds and ends.

It is certainly true that they had pitched camp here, Kalia told himself wordlessly. Where could they have gone? He came over to Nandi village. He sent the following report to the queen: 'We found out the place the Bhillas had pitched their tent at, but didn't find them!' In response came the queen's message: 'The Bhillas have been found. Your shrewdness hasn't taken a beating. You are the commander. Come over!'

Gratified by the hospitality extended by Shravasti, Devaraja the nobleman came over, with Madraka in front, to Nandi along with the diamonds and other stuff that king Subhanu had gifted him. He had been delighted by the news that Vatsaraja had vanquished the Bhilla king. Touching Vatsaraja's hands and torso to check if Vatsaraja was all right, he asked, "I hope you are not injured, are you?" The whole lot returned to Ayodhye. The people of Ayodhye had already learnt that Vatsaraja had become the commander. This gladdened their hearts. Upendra the Bhilla king and his soldiers who had been taken prisoner spent two days in the prison.

On the third day, his handcuffs taken off, the Bhilla king was produced before Her Excellency.

"Why did you raid Shravasti?" the queen asked.

"The Shravasti kings treat us like wild animals. They hunt the Bhillas on the day of Vijayadashami. They carry off our wives."

"What will you do if you and your men are allowed to stay in Ayodhye? Will you rob, loot and kill?"

"No, we won't. We harbour no animosity against the people of Ayodhye."

"It is not enough if you say you have no feelings of hatred against the people of Ayodhye. Only if you think Ayodhye is your own country and could live, becoming one with its subjects, you might get to live here. In case you can't, we have decided to present you and your soldiers as gifts to Subhanu the king of Shravasti."

"Please don't, Your Royal Ladyship! Giving my men over to Subhanu is as good as killing them! Instead you may as well kill us here. We can't bear that insult and torture," said the Bhilla king, opening his closed right fist. There were no fingers on his right hand. Then he ended sarcastically, "This is the rule of law in Subhanu's kingdom!"

This was the punishment meted out to him for performing his obeisance in the royal assembly by raising only one hand, as was the practice among the Bhillas!

"Make groups of fourteen people. Let them live as a family in the forest suggested by us. They should make their livelihood by raising honeybees and selling fruits. They should give up looting and killing. They will be given an annual income of ten gold coins. In return they should participate in the war whenever there is a royal order. They should protect the people from any adverse circumstances. They could also work as boatmen, ferrying people across. They could keep the income accruing from it. The seven of

you have to stay in Ayodhye, as a pledge against their good conduct. You will be treated appropriately here. Is this agreeable to all of you?"

"Your Worshipful Majesty! Your decision is agreeable to me. However it is necessary that I explain all your conditions to my people myself. If they stray even if for a small reason, my life or the lives of the six leaders might be fraught unnecessarily with peril!"

"By all means. Vatsaraja will take you with all royal honours to the Nandi village. A hundred of your soldiers are there in our army's possession. We should come to a decision, discussing it with them. But you shouldn't change that decision. They are only two ways open to you: Either being given over to Subhanu or settling down in Ayodhye according to my conditions."

"I got it, Your Serene Majesty!"

In his eager hurry to talk about what was to become of them, Upendra had forgotten to ask the queen what had become of the wealth that they had looted from the Shravasti merchants.

18

The queen called for the treasurer. The gifts that Nobleman Devaraja had brought from Shravasti and the wealth looted by the Bhillas lay in a heap in a strongroom. Her Excellency let the treasurer alone into the strongroom to assess their value. Even the treasurer's meal was supplied inside the vault. The bursar reported after two days of incessant effort that it was worth about two lakh *varahas*. He also added that he wasn't quite competent to evaluate pearls and diamonds.

"All right, I will compute now!" said the queen before going in. She got the bursar to spread all the valuable things in an even way. She told him to make sixteen equal parts. The treasurer drew long lines with a canestick, turning the whole lot into sixteen equal parts.

"All this wealth must be transported to the treasury at the rate of one part per month. Before the treasury is filled, competent people should value it. No one valuer should do the valuation twice. The valuation report should be submitted to me. You shouldn't broach this with anyone, be careful!" Saying this Her Excellency secured the door before entering her sleeping-apartment. She didn't look back at the bursar.

The treasurer stood looking in the direction the queen went, thoroughly amazed. Even as he set out after recovering his breath, he ran into Tarkshya.

"Is the valuation over, Krishna Bhandari?"

"Ask Her Majesty!" replied the treasurer, his voice overflowing with arrogance.

"You exerted yourself for two days. The queen did it in two minutes. Whose valuation is the true one?"

The treasurer then understood the subtle wit underlying Tarkshya's question. "True value.Tarkshya, only valuable people can do true valuation! Do you agree?" he asked, bringing a smile on.

"I agree!"

"You too?"

"Yes, I too! I have never in my life seen a queen like her, Bhandari!" Smirking they hit their respective paths.

19

The Bhillas agreed to all of Her Excellency's conditions. Discussing with the six leaders, King Upendra determined the sites where the soldiers could stay according to their subgroups, and accordingly submitted a list. Some of them were boatmen who had been living on the banks of the Ilavathi. They agreed to settle down in their new habitat as boatmen. Some were coppersmiths. The queen gave them the work of melting metal and forging it in furnaces arranged by her in the wooded area near Ayodhye. Some were hunters. Some were skilled in ivory work. Some of them were sellers of glass beads. The queen arranged for places appropriate to their occupations. Upendra the Bhilla king and his six companions were retained in Ayodhye with all royal honours.

There was another important problem: the families had to be brought into the kingdom of Ayodhye from the banks of the Ilavathi and the Gomathi. Her Excellency got a letter written by King Upendra and sent it with Veerasena to the Bhillas' territory. It was decided that only one or two families should be brought over at a time. In about a month and a half, all the families joined their family-heads.

20

His Excellency vomited that day, and then suffered from intestinal pain for three months. Only the royal physician and two nurses began to be with him.

"I should see my queen!" he said one day in the langour of his fever.

Purukutsani rushed to the mango grove as soon as she heard the news from a horseman.

"You have come, Purukutsani! I wasn't sure you would!"

Her Excellency placed the king's head on her lap before she stroked his hair.

"Come, Purukutsani! Come and sit by me!"

"No, Your Excellency, I shouldn't. You have fever!"

"I can enjoy mating with you even in the slothfulness of fever!"

"You please sleep now, Your Highness! As soon as you get well, both of us will go for a worship of Goddess Avanthikadevi. Let us also meet His Worship Devadema then."

"I am bitten by the bug of sexual lust now. I will see if you will observe the prescribed duty of a woman."

"Her husband's health is the first prescribed duty of a woman!"

"Will you come if the fever subsides tomorrow?!"

"Sure, I will!"

Word came the following day that the fever had exacerbated. Purukutsani went rushing again to her husband. She nursed him herself all night long.

But...

When Her Majesty came back the next morning completely tired, a huge concourse of people had congregated in the courtyard in front of the palace

It was the group of the Rgvedian Brahmins of Ayodhye. The moment Brahmins of the Vasishta clan came to know that the queen had got a hundred-*chandi* sacrifice going in Amaru, a gale of envy erupted in them. Her Excellency goes only to the Atharvavedian Brahmins for

help, they told themselves in a murmured aside. Is our goddess Vasantikadevi any less? Is our god Brahma any less? Are our *mantras* any less? Is the spiritual preceptor of our clan, Sage Vasishtha any less? The leading light of this loud thinking was Simha Bhatta--Simha for short--a Brahmin of the Vasishta clan.

As soon as Her Majesty arrived, the Brahmins moved aside, clearing the way for her.

Simha Bhatta was a discreet and prudent man. Unlike the others he hadn't come there out of a sense of spite. The priests of Ayodhye were authorities on the first three Vedas. The last Veda was not recognised by the gods. The actions mentioned in Atharvanaveda were useful only for things like magic and sorcery. Atharvanaveda was not a basic Veda. Simha Bhatta had honestly believed that encouraging it was in fact to affront Ayodhye.

"I haven't bathed. I don't feel that it is good to talk to the twice-born without taking a bath", the queen said when she saw Simha Bhatta."You the human gods may please allow me to bathe. Why did you stand there in the hot sun? Come in and rest in the audience-hall. I will organise some milk and fruits for you." Saying this the queen walked away to have her bath.

The human gods sat down in the audience-hall. Along with dried dates, fresh date fruits and almonds came saffron-mixed milk. In a short while appeared Her Majesty dressed in a white saree and a white blouse. She started to serve the gods-on-earth herself, the milk vessel in hand.

The light refreshments ingested, words wouldn't come out of the Brahmins' mouths. It was Simha Bhatta, who shuffled upto where the queen was seated before asking ever so politely, "How is His Excellency's health?"

"It grew worse yesterday. I stayed up the whole night. You people should give Goddess Vasanthikadevi a ceremonial bath."

"We are thinking of performing the hundred-*chandi* ritualistic sacrifice."

"All right. Sage Devadema has begun a sacrifice in Amaru. I have given five hundred *varahas* there. I will give a thousand *varahas* here in Ayodhye because Ayodhye has a greater number of Brahmins. His Excellency's health changed for the worse before the sacrificial ceremony ended in Amaru. Sage Devadema has thought of converting the hundred-*chandi* sacrifice into a thousand-*chandi* sacrifice. He must have thought five hundred *varahas* was a bit too much for a hundred-*chandi* sacrifice. With the thousand *varahas* that are being paid to you please perform whatever sacrifice you think suitable. The main idea is His Worshipful Majesty's health. Is that all right?"

"Yes."

Bhima Bhatta, a subtly deceptive, juggler of a Brahmin, stood up to say, "Tradition accords preferential importance to Rigvedi Brahmins, Your Royal Ladyship!"

"My grandfather was the royal priest to Ayodhye kings, Your Majesty!" a Samavedi Brahmin spoke up opposing the Rigvedian. "We are Samavedins!"

It was now the turn of Yajurvedins. "Hasn't it been said in the *Vishnu Purana* that the source of all Vedas is the Yajurveda, Your Serene Excellency!?", he submitted.

"Let us not discuss the Vedas now," said Simha Bhatta, stepping up." Losing her sleep last night, Her Excellency has come for a treatment of the king. She needs rest now. Let us take leave now. Let us offer a hundred-fold repetition of the *mantra* of '*triyambakam yajamahe*

sugandhim pushtivardhanam' at the Vasanthikadevi temple for the king's health. Let us after that determine our plan of the hundred-*chandi* sacrifice!"

Bhima Bhatta, a Rigvedi Brahmin, stood up to ask, "Which Veda is the hundred-*chandi* sacrifice a part of?"

"Stay silent, you mischief-monger!" screamed Shama Bhatta, the hunky Brahmin who stood by the others.

A gale of laughter erupted from a section of the Brahmins. A few others hung their faces. "You are right, he is a jabbermouth, a rattle-trap!" interjected still others. In sum every one went away happily.

At the door a Brahmin youth turned around to shout, "Let victory be Her Excellency's!" All the others chimed in. As the shouts of victory died down, Her Excellency stood up to say, "May His Majesty be victorious!"

Another cry of victory erupted. Contrite at forgetting the main issue of the king's health, many bit their tongues.

"Your Royal Ladyship! Please pardon our indiscretion. Quite a few of us are immature. We waste our scholarship in the tumult of argumentation."

"I don't take into reckoning your mistakes, the mistakes of the gods-on-earth. You perform the hundred-*chandi* sacrifice well. That would well do," exuded Her Majesty as she bid them farewell.

21

Whether it was because of the physician's skills or the effect of the hundred-*chandi* sacrifice, His Excellency, recovering completely, was up and about in a month's time. On the day the last offering was made to the sacrificial fire,

the queen went over herself, dressed the king in royal robes, and seating him in a chariot, took him to Vasanthikadevi temple. As soon as the two arrived, an auspicious mix of cymbal, trumpet and some festive instrumental music rose to a roaring crescendo. Inside on a platform milled Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras and married women. Around the sacrificial altar were Brahmins; on a platform were honourable men and noblemen; on another platform were the group of royal attendants and servants; on yet another platform were men of the merchant class; in the balcony had gathered boys and teenagers. On either side of the sanctum sanctorum stood the Ayodhye harlots, holding some vermilion-stained water and a brace of betel leaves and waiting intently for the royal couple.

Their Excellencies walked straight to the sanctum sanctorum, put some vermilion, turmeric, perfumed water and some flowers on to the goddess before receiving the consecrated water and the *prasada*. As soon as the royal couple came out, two eunuchs jingled the anklets that they wore before lashing a silver stick on to the floor. An old prostitute walked over, gave the king a hug, before going on to apply a black circlet on the king's cheek in a bid to draw off the effects of the evil eye. Thereafter all other women of easy virtue put out their hands in the king's direction and popped the joints of their hands, another gesture of drawing off the effects of evil eyes. As the king and the queen walked up, reddish perfumed water was sprinkled on their persons at regular intervals with a betel leaf tassel. His Majesty kept looking at their faces even as he progressed in his tracks, looking intently for Mriganayane who had afforded him such sensual ecstasy.

Mriganayane who had been banned from the royal bed stood a couple of steps behind, crest-fallen. The moment the king sighted her, one of his brows went up. Yet she sprinkled the perfumed water on him just from where she stood, her face long and livid. In the king's eager hurry to see her, the royal overcloth fell off. It was the queen herself who took up the cloth and put on the king's shoulders. Then when Their Majesties came in front of the sanctum sanctorum, married women waved a platter of flaming camphor downwards in front of them. Just as the queen received the respects being paid by everyone on the pretext of circumambulating the temple, the melodious Vedic *mantras* began to sail across. Standing in different groups, Brahmins versed in the four different Vedas sang a verse from their respective Vedas in their own style. Simha Bhatta, the priest officiating at the sacrificial fire, the *homagni*, stood holding the final offering in front of the sacrificial altar, and after jabbering some mantra and incanting a verse from Samaveda in soprano, had the royal couple throw the last offering into the sacrificial fire. Blazing in the sacrificial pit, Agni, the fire-god quickly jumped up to swallow the ultimate offering. Some married women sat the queen on the ceremonial seat and applying vermilion and turmeric on her face, filled her saree-end at the waist with coconuts and rice. A roar of exultation erupted.

In that brightly lit atmosphere Purukutsani with the elegantly prominent vermilion mark on her forehead indeed looked beautiful. But the picture of a woe-begone Mriganayane refused to disappear from the king's memory-screen. There was thereafter the torch light parade. His Worshipful Majesty, who had got tired in the bustle of the noisy shouts of exultation, sought the bed as

soon they reached the palace. Sleep seized him victoriously and instantly the moment Purukutsani saw him onto his bed. Just to please the subjects, Purukutsani came out alone and watched for a while the programmes of dance and drama that followed. She got up in the middle of the programme and entered the royal sleeping-apartment.

The vermilion mark on His Excellency's forehead had remained unsmudged.

Purukutsani fell asleep, clenched against the king in a firm embrace. She had to travel to Amaru the following day. The thousand-*chandi* ritual sacrifice turning into a hundred-*chandi* sacrifice could have become the butt of ridicule.

The king was sleeping pretty much like an innocent child sleeping in his mother's lap.

22

Early the following morning the queen mounted her chariot and travelled to Amaru.

Kalia the newly installed feudal chieftain had made elaborate and neat arrangements. His house had been extended a bit. The Avanthikadevi temple had been decorated with festoons. What was special was that married women from the seven Bhilla families that had come and settled down there recently put a necklace of pearls each around the queen's neck. They danced around Her Majesty. The queen too on her part put on a Bhilla cap and jigged and clapped. The cap still on her head, she came over to the guava grove and threw the last offering into the sacrificial fire. His Worship Sage Devadema gave her a private

audience again."The ritual sacrifice went on very well. All the married women of the town came over everyday with garlands for the fire-god," said the sage. "There is a message for you from His Worship Vamadeva the great sage. One of his disciples came over yesterday itself."

The queen's mind quickened the moment Sage Vamadeva's name touched her eardrums.

"What is the message?"

"'One should have a broad vision. It is not proper for the queen to be restricted to worrying just about her neighbouring states.' That is the message for you."

"What does it mean?"

"I don't know either. Did you worry about your neighbours?"

"Yes, I did. Ours is a small state. The neighbouring states are like a cushion to us. When the Bhillas raided and looted Shravasti, we went to their rescue. After their depredations in Shravasti, they could have attacked us too. King Subhanu didn't seek our help, but we sent him our troops. This enhanced our prestige and influence."

"You are clever, girl! The message has of course come. I understand its meaning. Whether you understand it or not is your affair. I can't say more. The way the planets are positioned indicates invasion."

"Could you not say in clear terms what should be done now?"

"Come over tomorrow on an empty stomach."

The following day Purukutsani went over for a meeting with the great sage. With the queen seated in front, the great sage contemplated his guru for a while. Then he gave her an intent look. He entered her inner soul, saw the

declivities, and as he sighted the luminous rays of the divine contours of her consciousness, breathed, his voice soft and low. "Direct your attention at the west for a while, girl! Do not ask us the meaning of this. We build our guesswork on the basis of your experience. Our experience is different. You think according to your experience. Have you so far paid any attention to the west?"

"No, I haven't. There are the Sharabha woods there. Beyond it is the Sharavana forest. There is no possibility of an invasion from that direction."

"There could be an incursion from that very direction."

A brief silence followed.

Purukutsani then paid her respects, joining her open palms at her chest.

"May you become the mother of a son!"

The queen didn't get the meaning of either message.

After her meal she left for Ayodhye.

The maidservant said His Excellency had left for the guava grove.

Tarkshya stood, his face cast down. Her Excellency walked up close and raised interrogatory eyebrows.

"The same thing over again, Your Royal Ladyship!"

Purukutsani didn't bother to ask, "Who is it?" She had got wind of it in Ayodhye the very day the last offering was chucked into the sacrificial fire.

23

Under Tarkshya's leadership fifty intelligence men travelled separately in the western direction disguised

variously as and acting the roles of tourists, itinerant saints, merchants, destitutes, horse-sellers, magicians, public entertainers with monkeys, dancing bears, actors, singers of celebratory songs of praise. They travelled all over, from Dwaraka to Gandhara. They went to countries like Bhrigukaccha, Malava, Avanti, Hastinapura, Kurupanchala, Krivi, Panchanada, Ahicchatra, Kashmira, Kurujangala, Takshaka, Mithila, Madra, Shaka, Hariyupiya, Tripura (western), Audumbura, Kekaya, Ambashta, Barbara, Bahlika, Mleccha, and Matsya.

In no country did they see signs of unrest, war preparations, and military expeditions to vanquish enemies, spite or ill will against the royalty or amassment of military personnel.

Ayodhye was safe and secure. There was peace and order. On the military front Ayodhye was a beehive of activity: arms were being accumulated with great tempo and momentum, and soldiers were being gathered together secretly.

Her Excellency however was apprehensive. Besides the worry of external affairs, the queen's mind was laden with domestic hassles as well.

While the rest of Ayodhye was all peace and order, a single heart was racked with distress.

PART TWO: BHADRAYU

1

After a year a storm erupted in the country of Dasharna.

Vajrabahu the king of Dasharna had two wives. Keshini the elder of the wives was the princess of the country of Panchala. Since she didn't bear the king any children, the king married Yadavi, a destitute, parentless girl of the caste of goldsmiths. The king knew that his elder wife was a bumptious, brittle-tempered and jealous woman. So he arranged for Yadavi to live independently in his palace outside the town. As it was, the queen was a ruthless woman. Her brothers began to poison her mind, to boot. They kept an eye on Yadavi. When Yadavi conceived, green-eyed envy surged up from deep inside Keshini. Yet shamming absence of spite and ill-will and under the pretext of putting on her blouse and of offering a ceremonial, celebratory *pooje* to women pregnant for the first time, she gave her poisoned food. The idea was to induce an abortion.

The younger queen was hardly six months gone when she started bleeding.

The royal physician came along, with his disciple, gave her some medicine before going away saying, "There's nothing to worry." As he left, he motioned to his

disciple to stay back. Keshini's younger brother stood in front of the palace. "What is the matter, Mr. Royal Physician? You are here? I only hope His Majesty is doing well," he asked, sarcasm tinging his voice.

"His Excellency has gone hunting."

"So..."

"The queen has been bleeding. I have given her some medicine. But the hopes of staying the bleeding are rather dim. Only He should see to her. Did the queen crave to eat mud during those days of pregnancy when woman craves things?"

"How do I know? Let her bite the dust!" said the elder queen's younger brother as he mounted his horse and left to let his elder sister know the good news.

The physician headed home on foot, fretting. His worry was of a different type though.

His clever disciple was Sage Rishabhadeva's devotee. His hermitage was there in Kurujangala at a distance of about eight *haradaris* away. Although the royal physician was not quite a particularly devout disciple of his, he did use to go to him now and then to learn some special remedial tricks of the field of medicine. He wouldn't however tell this to anyone. He would brag that it was his own research.

He had examined the queen quite a few times. He had surmised that Her Excellency had ingested poison. Only, he hadn't detected what kind of poison it was. As soon as it was known that Her Excellency's uterine flow was of a greenish blue colour, he gestured to his disciple. But he saw to it that no one in the village came to know about it.

The royal physician's student had the queen drink an anaesthetising medicine. He had secretly appointed six

palanquin-bearers. At the stroke of four at night when everyone was asleep in the palace, a palanquin emerged from the back entrance of the palace. Moving quietly toward Kurujangula by the bypath at the speed of one *haradari* an hour, it reached Sage Rishabhadeva's hermitage in the hour preceding sunrise, the *brahmi* hour.

Rishabhadeva's past was glorious, and his significance and influence enormous. He learnt all the four Vedas and retired to the Himalayas in his childhood to do self-denying penance. On his way back from the Himalayas, he lost track to end up in Kashmir. There he met travellers of Lakulisha lineage. Telling himself that he had anyway lost his way, he joined them. Travelling with them to Krivi and Bahlika, he performed an adoration of Goddess Hinglaja. Thereafter he went to Gandhara alone before coming down to Armeni. There he studied the Unani system of medicine. The spiritual preceptor, the guru vouchsafed him the rod of God Hermes. Rishabhadeva thus had, accrued with him, three rods: the rod of mercy of Lakulisha, the rod of adoration of Goddess Hinglaja and the twisted rod with two serpent-heads of God Hermes. Returning to Kurujangula, he studied Atharvanaveda and acquired some knowledge of serpents from the Naga people. He imbibed the expertise of removing poison.

"We will not stop the uterine flow. I will give some medicine to stem it," Sage Ṛishabha nodded his head after examining the queen.

"Why do you say that, Your Worshipful Majesty!?"

"Poison has been ingested when the foetus was three months old. Since it is a firm foetus, it is still alive. It has started breathing now. If we stop the flow completely now, it will collect at the bottom of the uterus, making it difficult

for the child to breathe. If we leave it like that, the mother will become very weak, and by the time she has to be delivered of the child, her life would be at risk. Our effort now would be to save two lives. Why didn't you bring her sooner?"

"What shall I say, Your Worship? If I tell the truth, the sin of maligning one's guru will accrue to me."

"It is the order of God Hermesha that without getting to know the full details, one shouldn't dispense medicine."

"The guru did know about the ingestion of poison. If he said it openly, he would incur Her Excellency's wrath. Besides it was a question of his pride about his medical knowledge. He laid down that I should take her to you after things got beyond a critical point. We have come here clandestinely. If anyone gets to know I would be punishable. When His Majesty went hunting, I used the opportunity to put the queen in a palanquin and get her here!"

"You did a good thing. But the child is already maimed. Some organs haven't grown."

"Won't it be difficult for the mother to raise the child?"

"The child will be a favourite of fortune, a lucky child. He will fashion his own life. The maimed parts will not come in the way of his efflorescence. Planets are configuring at his birth such that he is destined for kingship."

2

Twenty years had elapsed since these events. Her Excellency gave birth to a male child. The child had neither arms nor legs. Where there should have been arms there were shoulders with a single stump. There were little hands

attached to them. Even the legs had a single stump. Where there should have been five differentiated toes, there was a single undivided toe. The face however was as if chiselled to perfection. Although Her Royal Ladyship was delighted to see the face, she started weeping, assailed by a sense of shame at the ogre-like birth. The baby had no neck to speak of, the trunk being attached directly to the head.

Sage Rishabha wrote out the horoscope*, declaring the baby to be a future emperor. Her Excellency however was far from satisfied.

The newborn lay motionless for ten days. Its breathing was the sole telltale sign of life.

After ten days the child began to scream in a serious voice. The queen hugged it to her chest and suckled it. She had been troubled during the last ten days by the milk overflowing in her breasts. Once she nursed the child with the milk, the discomfort in her breasts disappeared. Besides, affection swirled up in great surges.

The queen made a supplication to the great sage: "Your Worship! I can't live in the city with such a baby. I would be the butt of ridicule. His Excellency would be angry with me because I bore him such a child. He will finish me off. My husband's rival wife will hate me. I am an orphan. No one will weep for me if I disappear. His Excellency looked after me well as long as I was there. He too will give me up once he sees the baby. He might even kill the child. Even if he takes me into his home, his other wife will try to poison me to death. I will live in the hermitage along with the child. May you please accommodate me."

"You can stay here, my girl! Stay without any anxiety

* Horoscopes are statements wherein the movements of the nine planets in the twelve stationary zodiac houses are prewired.

or misgivings. I will look after you. Your son will be a favourite of fortune. You look after him well if only for his future. Let him not feel the want of anything."

His Excellency sent his intelligence men in search of the queen. Two of them in fact came to the hermitage. Fortunately they didn't know her by sight. There were many reasons for this: Her Excellency lived outside the town; she had no royal honours; His Excellency had mounted a strict security on her ever since she had conceived; she had blanched after she became a nursing mother. They thought that she was an orphan of the Naga lineage. They took to their heels when they saw her child. "If my wife bore me a child like this one, I would decline even a kingship!" said one. "We are unlikely to become kings here. Let's go to the nether kingdom along with this child. We might become kings there," grinned the other. The twosome returned laughing.

The elder queen spread the word through her younger brothers. The story she spread was that the younger queen's pregnancy was clandestine and that His Excellency himself had driven her out. "*Ayyo*!" she lamented, turning on the water works, when the king returned from hunting. "*Ayyo*! she ran away! The home-lamp has gone out, oh god! Please get the heavens, the earth and the nether world combed. She has stolen and taken away the very life-breath of this kingdom." To the carriers of intelligence, however, she said, "I will give you a thousand gold coins, behead her wherever you find her!" The occasion however didn't arise. His Excellency came to know from his men of intelligence only the news doing the rounds in town. Although he initially regretted that the queen was not found, he retreated into silence saying to himself, "It's good that things have happened the way they have!"

The junior queen named her child 'Bhadrayu, Shakra'. She was driven by her wish that he should become a king as the guru had said. 'Shakra' means the king of gods, Indra.

The Naga-Shabara women who had settled down about the hermitage found it difficult to pronounce such an odd-sounding name. Prakritising it, all of them started calling him 'sagara'. This came to stay. (This Sagara is *Ikshvaku*)

3

In the next five or six years the king suffered his first paralytic stroke. He however recovered after being laid up for six months.

Keshini the younger queen roped some ministers and military commanders into her camp before handing the reins of power over to Durgasimha, her younger brother for the period of His Excellency's disabling illness. The chariot of the state marched on. After six months when the king came to, he assumed command again. A second stroke in the next three years left the left part of the king's body from the neck downwards totally paralysed. The queen's brother took charge again. This time he wouldn't listen to the queen at all. He began to behave as if he was the real king. A third attack in the next two years left the king bed-ridden, reducing him this time to a vegetable.

Then at the instance of the chief minister, a civic representative met the queen secretly with a complex of proposals. "Such an ad hoc arrangement of administration by all and sundry won't do," he said. "His Excellency cannot rule any more. The administration has gone out of

gear. Either you should run the state, or crown the king's younger brother's son. You should administer the state yourself till he is eighteen years of age. These are the three proposals. There isn't a fourth one."

"Isn't the present administration liked by the people?"

"Is it by you, Your Royal Ladyship?"

Her Excellency felt that the conflict between her and her younger brother was already out.

"I haven't received any complaint," she said.

"The managers of the state keep complaints from reaching you."

It then dawned on Her Excellency that her writ wouldn't run if the king's younger brother's son was crowned the king. She felt that making her younger brother the king was the best course.

The elder of her younger brothers was the one who had tasted power. Feeling shy, the queen jibbed at airing the proposal herself. "Your third suggestion is agreeable to me. But you explain it in detail to Durgasimha. Fetch him here for a decision."

The citizen conveyed the queen's decision to the minister. The minister showed what he was capable of in the next two days.

It was weekly market day on Tuesday, a day when the Nagas, the Shabaras and the Mallas of the neighbouring villages brought their wares and sold them. The town would get very dirty on that day. In order to escape the milling mass of humanity, the town administrator went hunting along with his friends. He had done a misdeed on Monday night. He had misbehaved with a Shabara maidservant and pushed her through the window in his

intoxicated mood. Injured in the leg, she lay there moaning. The next morning her parents came over, their merchandise in tow, to the capital. They strolled round to the palace to see their daughter. They put her on a steer-cart, and fetched their leader. He complained to the police officer who brought the aggrieved lot to the minister to report their plaint.

"Be here for an hour. I will send for the physician," submitted the minister. The people began to talk loudly. The minister, putting his finger on his closed lips, enjoined silence, then blinked his eyes.

After he came to know that Durgasimha the administrative officer had gone hunting, the minister took the whole lot to Her Excellency. The minister went in alone, explained everything to the queen before concluding that even if the administrative officer returned from hunting, he was no authority to adjudicate as he himself was the accused in so many cases, and therefore Her Excellency herself should pronounce a decision.

The queen exercised her authority. Her judgement was: *The administrative officer should beg the maidservant's pardon. He should pay a hundred varahas for the maid's medical treatment, and it shouldn't be from the state treasury but from his own pocket. The girl should be paid her next six months' salary right now and allowed to go on leave.* Her Royal Excellency came out herself and announced her judgement to the Shabaras.

The episode could have ended right there. But the minister had different ideas. He met the Shabaras and, in a huddle, he told them in a persuasive tone: "You should take out a procession of your people, and hail and hurrah the queen mouthing shouts of 'victory!', 'well done!' and do

the administrative officer down, mouthing shouts of censure and reproach. "The minister's only driving reason for this was in his words, 'This should reach the citizens' ears.'

Over five hundred Shabaras took out a procession in the afternoon. They went round the capital shouting slogans, came over to the palace, and had the queen come out by proclaiming slogans there as well before showering her with unstinted praise.

In the evening when the administrative officer came back from hunting, his intelligence-carriers reported to him all that had transpired down to the last detail. He felt pulled between multiple opposing courses of action: He hesitated to go and tell the queen. Besides he had several times incurred her wrath, violating her orders. Standing before her as the guilty was tantamount to letting his power take a knock, to denting his authority. If on the other hand he went to the minister, he jolly well knew what he would say. He would certainly ask how he could approach the minister for a judgement when he himself was the subject of the complaint. What then? Was he to seek the maidservant's pardon? One could end the anecdote by giving the girl's parents two hundred instead of one hundred *varahas*. But what about the procession? The slogan shouting? The proclamations of reproach? There is a hidden agenda in this, the administrator told himself in inference. I ought to bring it out into the open. He sent for the minister.

The messenger came back to say that the minister had sat down for his evening adoration of god, and thereafter he had to listen to the recitation of texts relating to goddesses, and that if needed he could come over the following morning. He also added that the minister asked, "What is the matter?"

The administrative officer felt as if the ground beneath his feet gave way: He had never got such a rough answer from the minister in the past. 'The fellow has schemed to take over the reins of power himself in the name of the queen, the cad! I should dock his tail right away!,' the administrative officer thought to himself before mounting his horse and riding over to the minister's place.

The minister had really sat down for his evening worship of god. What this means is that after the messenger left he sat down for the prayer just to show that what he had said was true. It was well and widely known that the minister wasn't exactly a chaste, god-fearing and pious man.

The administrative officer sat out, smug and stubborn, for as long as an hour, saying resolutely and wordlessly to himself: 'I won't let him be today!'

The minister, sacred ash-smeared, emerged hurriedly, and took up the word himself: "We have arranged for a reading of texts relating to goddesses in the interest of His Royal Excellency's health. It is as well that you came over. You may listen to the reading, receive the *prasada* and return. The teacher doing the reciting is going to be here now."

"Did you invite me?"

"Yes, I did. My servant had popped down in the morning to invite you. He came back to report you had gone hunting."

"Be that as it might, word has come that it was you who inspired the angry fierce cries of censure and reproach that the Shabaras mouthed off against me. Is that so?"

"Inspiring is god's job. How could a human being inspire another human being?"

"Let me just know this. Is it true that you wheedled them?"

"Who said it? Please get whoever said it to stand facing me!"

"Tell me if it is true or not, don't hedge! What is your role in this?"

"My role is that of reporting what happens to the right official, leaving the judgement to him."

"I am the right official."

"You can't be the judge in this case."

"Am I the accused then?"

"Yes, you are. I may be pardoned for saying this."

"The complaint came at the stroke of two. Why did you wait for another hour? That was to open the doors for my hunting trip and for facilitating your plot, wasn't it?"

"If we had brought the wounded servant before the queen without any treatment, the punishment would have been still more severe. The physician washed the wound and bandaged it, reducing its frightful severity."

"How serious is the injury?"

"The right leg is broken."

The seriousness of the injury stumped the administrative officer, considerably softening his stand. He started to argue from a different angle.

"Isn't the queen's decision unilateral? Why wasn't I called?", he asked.

"That is upto the queen."

"I had issued strict orders to you that such things shouldn't be reported directly to the queen, hadn't I?"

"It would have been unrighteous conduct in this case not to report to the queen. I would have followed your order in other things. I of course will in future: you are my superior officer."

"What in thunder would you have lost if you had waited for another day?"

"Even if you had been around, I would have reported this to the queen."

"It is not that. If I had been around, I would have had an opportunity to speak my piece in my defence."

"If I had delayed things where justice should be prompt, people would have shouted outcries of censure and reproach against me!"

"What am I to do now, tell me."

"You kindly see the queen, say whatever you want to say, justifying your action and get the punishment whittled down."

"Is your suggestion just this?" he asked before ending sarcastically," You are a good minister!"

"If I am at fault, please tell me!"

"Did I annoy, irritate and disappoint you?"

"The question doesn't arise in politics."

The teacher who was to do the reading arrived. So did the hour of reading aloud of texts relating to goddesses. The reading had to start in a moment.

The administrative officer asked,"What happened to your invitation?"

"It always stands. Please come in!"

"Please send me the *tirtha* and the *prasada* tomorrow. I will take leave. I have seen another face of the minister today."

"I have only one face. Let your merciful favour be forever on me!"

"All right. I will see," said the administrative officer and left, pulling a long and fretful face.

Back in the palace, he changed his dress and took out two hundred *varahas* from his personal safe before leaving on horseback. He parked the horse at a distance from the weekly market before entering the market. His desire was to meet the maid's parents without any ado, pay the penalty and beg their pardon.

What in fact happened however was that an old man who was one among the Shabaras who had cried shouts of reproach for over two hours against him raised the outcry of censure over again. Ten or twelve boys surrounded him and joined in the outcry, just for fun. A few boys too joined them. Finding the maidservant's parents in the market turned out to be rather difficult. The administrative officer didn't even know the name of the village that the maidservant hailed from.

"Who is the leader of the Shabaras?"

They pointed to one man, and he pointed to another, and he pointed to a third. In the end the village headman came forward, and said,"We will get the village council to meet. You beg forgiveness before it."

"All right," agreed the administrative officer.

Thereafter it took about two hours to get the village committee to meet in council. Two more hours had passed by the time the officer begged their forgiveness in the presence of witnesses, paid up the penalty of two hundred *varahas* and got over to the tree that he had tethered his horse to. A meeting with Her Excellency was not possible that night.

4

Her messengers reported the news of the meeting of the village council on the previous evening to the queen. She had never imagined that such a misadventure could have been done. She had never imagined her judgement could have such far-reaching consequences. The fallout was much more than she had fancied. What follows is the story of these consequences.

The next morning the administrative officer met the bursar before calling on the queen and begging for a thousand *varahas*. "There has been an order issued yesterday that no money should be given away from the treasury without the prior orders of Her Excellency", said the bursar.

The queen had issued a general order, but only to cover the specific instance of the administrative officer trying to take money from the treasury to make his payment to the maidservant.

This led the queen's younger brother to believe that she had grabbed all his powers.

There was still half an hour in which to meet Her Excellency. He could have seen that he was a person of power and position. But he was rash by nature, given to behaving in deliberationless haste. Now he was in a fret of anxious distress, to boot. He saw only two ways. The first was to meet the queen straightaway, bear down on her in a show of aggrieved aggression, and ask in high-pitched forceful tones why she had ordered the bursar the way she had, pretending he was not related to Her Excellency by

blood. If she asked any questions, tell her that he had paid up double the amount she had ordered to be paid as penalty yesterday. The other way was to lie prostrate before the queen, and to say, "I have followed the queen's orders to the letter; now you grant me your pardon." The second alternative was unnatural.

In that state of anxious agitation, the first way seemed right to Durgasimha. The queen was after all his elder sister. The authority that a brother has over his sister was there, to be reckoned with.

He went over fifteen minutes earlier and rapped on the queen's door rather hard. Thinking it was her maidservant, Her Excellency said," Come in!" Durgasimha barged in slamming the door open. The queen pulled a long face. She didn't quite pay heed to the rush of her brother's questions. She ordered him to sit. "I haven't come to sit," he said, still standing. "The labourers digging the tank have to be paid today. I went to the treasurer, asking for money. He said it needed your permission. If things go on like this, the work will stop."

"Sit down!" the queen hollered.

Flabbergasted by the rudeness of his sister's voice, Durgasimha sat down, somewhat enraged. Her Royal Ladyship set to doing her hair even as she fought for control over her anger. After fifteen minutes elapsed she stepped up close to him. "You are no longer the administrative officer," she declared, her voice still tremulous with indignation. "The service you have rendered so far is enough. I have taken over every aspect of administration. You may go." She didn't say where to.

"All right. I'll see how your administration will run without me. Administration is not as easy as sorting out tangled hair!"

"Scram!" screamed Her Serene Majesty the queen, stamping her foot in great fury.

Not knowing where to head, Durgasimha came back home. There were about five thousand *varahas* in his safe that was made up of money gotten from the treasury, the bribes obtained from traders and fines and penalties wangled by coercion. He took the money without counting it, put it in a moneybag, and took a few clothes before mounting his horse.

Going to father's place at Panchala and telling him that the queen has excommunicated him is one way, said Durgasimha to himself, as his own situation took up his thoughts. *But I have dared her to run the administration without me... How is it possible for a man like me to accept defeat without the semblance of a fight or the hint of friction?*

In any case the Shabaras are united, against me. I should go over to the female slave's village and marry her, Durgasimha's thoughts raced even as the horse galloped out of the town. *Which maidservant wouldn't agree if a royal person offers to marry her? Opting to marry her would illustrate my love of truth. As my prestige goes up, I should get together an army of the Shabaras, and raiding Dasharna, make the queen bite the dust... That is a good idea. There was nothing that Durgasimha could teach the Shabaras in archery. He could however teach them the art of swordery and the skills of horse riding. There are in Dasharna my friends who accompany me on my hunting expeditions. I should work out an agreement with them. After my incursion they should engineer a rebellion from inside....*

Hunger stung Durgasimha. He had forgotten to bring his food. He drank water from a brook thereabouts, ate

some *kavale* fruit, and tethering the horse to a tree, went to sleep.

He must have slept for about two hours. He heard some people talk. Just as an air bubble wends its way up from the oceanfloor, his alert mind exploded suddenly into lucid consciousness, rising from the subterranean depths of sleep. "He is the man who outraged Shravana's modesty," someone was saying. "He is the one against whom we raised a stink of reproach yesterday, He is the one!"

Around him stood Shabara young men with bows and arrows and a Shortie bereft of limbs. Sitting up, Durgasimha leapt to his feet before he unsheathed his sword. He raised the sword and was on the point of attacking the one who had spoken the words when something seemed to flash across. A searing pain rose suddenly in his hand before he felt his strength ebb.

The arrow that the Shortie had let fly from his little bow in the blink of an eye had pierced the region between the bones in Durgasimha's hand. Nobody knew when he lifted his bow, when he tied the bowstring and took aim. Durgasimha's grip loosened before the sword fell down with a clank. But this took none of the Shabaras by astonishment. The arrow had been unleashed with such skill that it had penetrated the region between the bones without telling on the bones before staying put with one end sticking out. Although Durgasimha felt the sting of pain, he stood in amazed admiration at the dwarf's uncanny dexterity. It became clear as he took a look at him that the bowman had no arms. His two armless hands issued out of his shoulders. His bow and arrows were like children's toys. It took quite a while for the wound to bleed after the arrow had struck Durgasimha: such was the pinpoint accuracy of the aim.

"Bravo! Well done!" gushed Durgasimha, clapping with the wounded hand.

Nobody paid any heed to him. The dwarf's face was deadpan too. The Shabaras set to discussing in their own language what punishment should be meted out to Durgasimha.

"I have already paid up the penalty to Shravana," shouted Durgasimha.

A Shabara who knew both the languages said, "That is according to the law of your caste. Shabaras have a different law. Would that be agreeable to you?"

"Yes, it would, pretty much."

Two Shabaras tied him to a tree with a rope. Another blindfolded him with a piece of cloth. A fourth one took off his lower outerwear, the *dhotra* before he took the moneybag that was tucked in at his waist and chucked it away to the dwarf man. The Shortie caught it with one hand, which rendered him off balance. To keep from falling he hopped around, describing a circle.

"What will they do?"

"They will dock your genital and shove it into your mouth. That is their custom."

"I came here with the purpose of marrying Shravana! To submit my proposal to her parents!"

A new thought chased all at once through the Shabaras' minds.

"Why then did you outrage her modesty?" they probed.

"I was intoxicated with liquor then. I myself don't know what I did." This pushed the Shabaras into another huddle.

The short man spoke with a stutter. Only the tongue

filled his mouth. He had no neck. The head had stuck to the trunk."Take him along to our guru," he stammered."Let him give his ruling." It took him a good ten minutes to say this much, a chunk of speech which included so many cock-eyed consonants.

The Shabaras nodded their heads, "Vrishabendra will not agree to their customs."

The discussion continued.

"We have seen her leg being broken," the Shabaras said to Durgasimha. "We just came from her place. They live in a nearby village. They had to serve out meals to ten villages because of your misdeed."

"What happens if a meal is served?"

"Shravana reinstates into our caste."

"Hand me some punishment. I will become pure too. The punishment you suggest is not appropriate for a man who's going to marry soon!"

There was some more discussion upon which they chopped off a toe of his right leg with a sharp knife. The thin knife was so sharp that Durgasimha didn't feel any pain even though blood had begun to dribble out. Then they had him pass water into a coconut shell and set him drinking it. Thereafter they made him sit on a wide slab of stone before gingerly taking out with pincers the arrow that had pierced his hand. It was a small arrow, pretty much like a big needle. It had been whittled down by whetting.

"We'll let Shravana's parents know your demand. We are now making tracks for home. Come along!"

On the way they picked some fruit, which they gave him to eat.

All the Shabaras left for their homes leaving Durgasimha

and the dwarf at Sage Vrishabhendra's hermitage.

Yadavidevi the younger queen who'd been looking forward to seeing Sagara rushed to the entrance door to welcome him. But the sight of Durgasimha forced a shocked scream out of her throat before she sagged down onto the floor and fainted.

The dwarf was a brisk walker. He quickly stepped forward and held his mother, cushioning her and preventing her falling to the ground before laying her down softly on the floor. Durgasimha stepped near, and recognizing the scrawny, grey-haired junior queen Yadavi who was dressed as a destitute, hung his face. Just then His Holiness Vrishabhendra who had sat cross-legged for his evening adoration of god offered water for a wash to god and prematurely ending the worship right there, came out. "What happened?" he asked. Yadavi sat reclining against the dwarf's thigh. The dwarf was fanning her with her own saree-flap. The new face, that of Durgasimha, stood in front, his head hanging in seeming contrition, and tears sluicing out of his eyes.

Vrishabhendra and the dwarf carried Yadavi Devi to the middle-room, leaving the Shortie inside to treat the queen with a mix of turmeric and *lowla* juice. "Who are you?" asked the renunciate ascetic as he came out.

"I am the scoundrel who brought my sister and elder queen Keshinidevi poison twenty two years ago so she could poison Yadavidevi to death. She passed out now seeing me!" he replied, narrating the story from end to end. He also added that he'd lost his high position and rank and had been exiled and that he intended to marry Shravana, settle down here, and banding together an army of Shabaras.

"Are you marrying Shravana just to wreak vengeance on your sister?"

He said 'No' to begin with before he did a rethink to end up saying 'Yes'.

"You won't get the support of god for anything done out of hatred and spite, be careful!"

"I have done unjustly by Shravana. Isn't it my prescribed duty to set it right?"

"Yes, that's your prescribed duty. But prescribed duty is not all in the matter of marriage. One has to take the vow of 'I won't transgress the limits of 'lust, lucre and the law of virtue' in the presence of the holy fire."

Durgasimha nodded his head, as if he'd comprehended everything.

His Worship foraged his face for royal features. He didn't as yet feel like saying, 'Show your hand.' He shook his head.

"Will I be victorious?"

"You rest now. I'll tell you tomorrow." The sun was sinking into the western horizon. The seer inwardly noted the time the question had been asked.

"Will Queen Yadavi pardon me?"

"You ask her and see. Ask her when she is alone. Don't tell anyone you were the one who purveyed the poison. I'll also see that she doesn't either.. Go in and take some tiffin. Sagara will take you along."

Yadavi Devi had come to. Yet she lay training a vacuous gaze on the roof rafter. The ascetic walked in and got on with his evening adoration of god. After the evening prayer he came over and sat opposite Yadavi Devi. Respectfully Yadavi Devi sat right up and adjusted the saree-end sweeping her bosom, her face fallen.

A brief silence followed. Yadavi's patience ran out.

"Where should I go if in this hermitage even a person who poisons others to death could stay?"

"He will go away. Don't you worry."

The unruffled voice of the sage ruffled Yadavi's feathers. "Ayyo!" she hollered gritting her teeth and writhing in resentment. "My son's limbs have got deformed and disabled because of this butcher. Why should I feed him? What kind of justice is this? I carried a deformed foetus for nine months. I raised a deformed child for eighteen years. People who perpetrate injustice, a low execrable kind of injustice, live in great comfort and revel in happiness. God gives more trouble and unhappiness to those who endure every hardship and adversity without so much as a cheep in reaction. Oh God! What kind of a creation is this of yours?"

"You abuse Him, girl! Even such abuse is His eulogy!"

Her Excellency started really to cry now. "Is this your Vedanta? Is this your answer? I would spit on such a god...", she hissed, her frame shaking.

"My offering of water to the gods to wash and your spitting on Him are versions of the same action! When you spit, your unhappiness doubles and when I offer water for an ablution, my peace of mind doubles!"

"Your action of offering water to the gods for a wash is a selfish one, isn't it? It's not meant for others' welfare, right?"

"Yes, you are right, girl! If everyone achieves his own welfare, the world will be a happy place."

"Isn't that a low kind of selfishness?"

"Selfishness, yes, but not low. The Vedas say the same

thing. One who does well for oneself never gets into a degenerate state."

"Oh Your Holiness! I've had enough of your lecture. You please answer my question. What sin had the child in the womb committed? For what crime of his did his limbs get deformed? And whose crime? Tell me, father! Tell me, my guru! Please answer my question before leaving," beseeched Yadavi, her hands holding fast the spiritual preceptor's legs, and her eyes holding fast on his face in a ruthless gaze.

"Even if I give you an answer now, you will not understand it, girl, in the state of mind you are in! Calm down. I will give you an answer," said the sage and made to get up.

"You give an answer before you leave," persisted Yadavi holding his feet tight. "What crime had the child in the womb committed? What crime had I committed? Why this punishment? What is the meaning of this? Who should have been punished? I won't let you go unless you answer this question." She, in a fret of stubbornness, lashed the floor with her tresses, and wouldn't let go of His Holiness's feet. "Don't hedge, unfolding your cock and bull stories of current suffering being a function of the misdeeds of previous lives captured in words like fortune, destiny (*prarabdha*), accumulated sin (*sanchita*), *lkiyamana* and things like afterlife etc. Give me a direct answer!" Moved by the soulful voice of the mother in her questions, the sage changed his mind.

"I will put some questions to you: isn't your husband a good man?"

"Yes, he is."

"How has he treated you?"

"He has treated me with respect, courtesy and given me delightful gratification."

"Such a good and benevolent king has had three paralytic strokes. The third one has reduced him to a living corpse. He has not died. Nor is he living. He lacks the strength even to roll over to his side. What sin is this punishment for?"

Breaking the cruelly unpleasant news in a rather evil moment, the sage gave her righteous wrath the form of genuine grief by transmuting her past woes into present ones.

Listening to this dreadful news that epitome of love and affection broke out in a weeping paroxysm, relegating her philosophical questions to the back ground. The ascetic renunciate let her cry her heart out and calm down, then said, "Don't cry, girl! He will live in that state for another six years. There is in other words no danger to the marriage badge of vermilion on your forehead. But does this satisfy you?"

"No, it won't.," Yadavi nodded, continuing sobbing.

"The questions posed are life's fundamental questions. They accost man from moment to moment. There are no answers to them. If one doesn't answer them however the mind is not at peace. That is why people like me have researched to find some or other answers; we have created stories of sins of previous lives in words like *prarabdha*, *sanchita* etc. These are not cock and bull stories. Nor are they truths. You've been given this life to live. Your own well-being and welfare depend upon how well you use this opportunity. If you are an enlightened person, you will shape your present life by getting to know its purpose and treading a virtuous path. Even if you are not an enlightened

man, religion drags you onto the virtuous path by offering you a network of such imaginary fears."

"Where then does justice come from?"

"It comes from man's heart. Justice is absolutely essential for his social life. His mind steadies if there is justice. If he sins, his mind goes nuts."

"Is there no justice in the world? Has man conceived a construct called 'justice' only for his needs?"

"There is justice even in the heart of the world. Our feeling that our heart is split asunder when there is injustice is because of the fundamental power of the world."

"An answer hasn't come forth to my basic question. What injustice had the child in my womb committed?"

"Why do you bother about others? One should commiserate, and not get enraged, when injustice is done to others."

"Is my son an 'other' for me?"

"Yes, he is an independent, autonomous and self-contained individual. He doesn't have arms, doesn't have legs. It is precisely for this reason that the power of his soul has acquired more spectacular expertise and mastery than those of people with normal limbs. His speed has augmented because he doesn't have legs. Because he doesn't have arms, the dexterity of his hands has increased a hundred fold, and he shoots arrows with greater celerity than others. His speech has retarded because he doesn't have a neck. But he works with a single-minded dedication till he achieves something that he has decided on. I have said earlier that he is Fortune's darling. Have you imparted these skills to him? Did I give him? Hasn't his soul-power grown beyond all his disabilities? Think it over."

"Do all lame people and persons with armless hands become skillful like him?"

"They do by virtue of their nature. Your son who grew up among Shabaras has become a bowman. Soul-power gets expressed only in its full efflorescence. Disabilities don't come in the way. Even its own parents have no authority over it."

"Why do we raise children?"

"For your own love of them, and for the greed of the future. Its fulfillment depends on the children's good qualities. We should try to spur the child's general growth. Did you, to begin with, think of developing him as an archer? Every soul is self-born and independent." In the meanwhile the dark aspect of her fury abated and the strength of its goodness and purity developed.

"Sir, I had placed all these questions with a great desire to get the answers in order to ask you to punish my brother-in-law. I don't feel like asking you to do it now. I pray that something good happens to my son and husband."

"So be it!"

Durgasimha, who finished his tiffin in the kitchen-hut, let the dwarf do his adoration of god and strolling over to the hermitage, eavesdropped on half the Rishabha-Yadavi dialogue. He walked in and said,"Oh my guru!, you said every soul is self-born and independent. Her Excellency prayed for the welfare of her son and husband. You accepted it. Are the two not a contradiction in terms?"

"Goodwill and good desire issue from god. I received them on His behalf. Evil feeling and evil desire hit the god's bastion, bounce back to bring along grief and sorrow to the praying person himself. Even the guru who receives them becomes worthy of punishment."

"I have come to do justice to Shravanadevi by marrying her. Isn't that good desire?"

"Your intentions spring from spite. Until the heat of your hatred levels out, your intentions won't get divine support."

"Which god supports this?"

"The god who is witness to everything in the cosmos and who is inside your heart."

"How should one get His support, tell me, Your Worship!"

"The intention behind your desire to wed Shravana ought not to be to band together an army of Shabaras and attack Dasharna. If one attempts to do something with an evil purpose, both would stand to be damaged. If you genuinely desire to make Shravana your lawful wife, don't mix another desire with this."

"Who would marry the girl that I have debauched?"

"You don't have to have that fear. Feeding Shabaras of ten villages with a meal, her parents have accepted her back into their caste."

"I have paid a penalty for Shravana's sake. I have lost my toe. I have imbibed my own urine. I've thus become impure, haven't I?"

"They are punishments. Punishments cannot purify your intentions. What you want should become clear to your own self."

"What should I do for purification?"

"You ought to do self-inquiry. You should leave aside the issue of justice and injustice. You mustn't marry in order to dispense justice. To desire a wife for love, for co-living and for living with someone following the same duties and customs is something God would agree with."

"Where should I do self-inquiry?"

"Here, there and every which way! Now, this very moment or after six months or after six years.It depends only on you."

"Are mixed purposes always unsuccessful?"

"The chances of failure are greater. Even if one were successful, one wouldn't be happy and content. The very taste of success dwindles."

Durgasimha the dolt set to thinking.

"Her Excellency had thought of praying to you about my ruination. Instead she prayed for the welfare of her own husband and son. Does this mean she has pardoned my misdeed?"

"That is the dignity of her inner purity and goodness."

"Don't I have purity and goodness in me?"

"Yes, you do. It hasn't developed; it hasn't purified."

"Let that be. That Her Excellency didn't pray for my destruction now means that my own destruction is averted, isn't it?"

"Even if she'd made such a prayer, you'd not have been destroyed. On the other hand that she didn't pray doesn't mean your destruction is averted! Her prayer and your destruction have nothing to do with each other."

"In that case don't your blessings have any value?"

"They do. We bless the purity and goodness of a prayer. We can't bless evil desires."

"What is the benefit that accrues from your benediction?"

"Purity and goodness work capably."

"I want to defeat my elder sister Keshinidevi now. Yadavidevi who is here too desires the same thing. (Sage Rishabha signalled silence to Yadavi who tried to protest.)

Let's assume she has got eighty per cent purity and goodness in her, and twenty per cent in me at the least. If we together pray for the same thing may you please bless that we will be victorious by fifty per cent?"

"Man's purity and goodness should issue from his own self."

"If that is the case, let Yadavi pray. I'll wage the war."

"It seems Your Worship hasn't learnt accounting." Her Excellency looked angry. Sage Rishabha signalled over again.

"In matters such as sin-moral merit, good desire-evil desire, love-hate, one should determine things like the total sum and the balance after any deduction oneself. Nobody can keep an account of it."

"Your Divine Grace seems to be partial to the younger queen."

"The pure and good aspects of her personality have evolved over the last six lifetimes. It has afforded her the necessary strength to withstand the adversities, the trials and tribulations of forty years in this seventh birth. You were a bear before your previous six stints on earth. You were born a monkey in the fifth life. It is your good fortune that somebody, holding you by the hand, led you into a hermit's life. Young sages taught you the art of taking the blind old ascetics around. By virtue of the spiritual merit that accrued to you because of this, you were born a human in your third stint on earth. But the characteristics of a monkey still remained with you. You thieved jumping from roofto[illegible] top. Once you stole a neck-string of pearls in [illegible] ...urdsman was charged with the theft. [illegible] ...d, the guardsman was being taken to the [illegible] ...k. His wife and children followed him

sobbing. Then a little goodness, a little purity of heart stirred in you. "A crow had thrown the pearly string under the window," you said, which was a lie. This brought about the guardsman's acquittal. Pleased with your honesty they gave you the job of a guardsman right in the palace. You afforded pleasure to the king's many abandoned queens with your clever window hopping. By virtue of their good wishes, you became a eunuch, guarding the palace in your next lifetime. Even though you didn't get it, you did the job of conveying the queen's message to her lovers. When the invasion came about, you met with heroic death guarding the palace. You were a prince by birth. Yet since you were the second one, your elder brother kept you away, letting you grow up in your sister's place. You assisted your sister-queen in her activities of hate. Since all her activities originate in hatred, you have become a victim of hate yourself. You are not safe unless you root out hate!"

"What should I do to attain salvation in this very life?"

"No one can attain salvation in just one lifetime. You are still immature, unripe. The qualities of purity and goodness evolve in terms of the experience of several lives before one attains the state of a realised soul. The efflorescence of the soul is the goal of life."

"How many more lifetimes do I still need?"

"It depends only on you."

"If you are a good and pure soul hundred percent, could we call it salvation?"

"In the state of salvation, man lives for the sake of others. However he will have grown enamoured of his own goodness and purity. The difficulties, quandaries and the tight corners that life puts him face to face with pain him. Consider my own case. My previous life was like that. I

learnt to regard my illness with equanimity in later years. I have acquired knowledge and learning and am working just for the welfare of others. I had to travel long distances to imbibe knowledge. I will have these as my traits-by-birth in my next life. Even as you have knowledge and learning, your attachment to it will die away. Then one has to prepare to get to the next state of being."

"What is that state?"

"I won't tell you. Even if I tell you, you don't have the necessary preparedness to understand it. I could tell the queen if so desired. One needs prior preparation even to understand language-you don't even have it as yet."

"Let that be. Why do you bother about what is happening to my life? I have a prayer to make. Will you bless me?"

"You are not yet qualified, have not as yet attained the ability to pray. Tell me your desire if any."

"Will the desire I harbour in my mind now be fulfilled?"

"It'll be fulfilled in the next two years."

"Respectful thanks to you. I feel fulfilled."

"May god give you the time sufficient enough for the pure and good part in you to blossom. Now the property of inquiry has sprouted right in your propensity for desires. This would find its full efflorescence in the next twenty births. In the twentieth life, the state of being next to it viz a mindset where man feels a desire to escape from the birth-death cycle will be inspired. Things will thereafter evolve rapidly and in a maximum of five or six births, you'll acquire the capability of praying. This is enough for today. You have the good fortune of getting some guidance tomorrow morning."

The Shortie came along to take him for his meal.

"You be with your mother tonight," said the great patriarchal sage. "She has all the symptoms of cold fever. Go and tell the appropriate person to arrange for Durgasimha's bed in the cook's hut."

"Your Worship! May I ask what his desire was?" asked Her Excellency after he left.

"God's play! Man's desire doesn't end even in the face of death."

"Whose death are you talking about, Your Holiness?"

"A shadow in a standing position appeared behind his back when he sat. Didn't you get to see it?"

"No, I didn't."

"That is the shadow of death."

Early next morning the crier came tomtomming: "After the next fifteen days in the fortnight of the waxing moon, Karnasimha the king of kings will be coronated the king."

Durgasimha's heart lurched at the news before he mumbled to himself: "Coronation as king for my fourteen year old brother! Yet His Worship has said this is showing the way. Could this be the way opened for me to vanquish the queen of the kingdom of Dasharna?"

The spot where the arrow had struck had swollen. Durgasimha went to Shravanarani's village in that very condition and placed before her parents his demand of marriage. "Let the wound heal. We'll then think about it," they said. Durgasimha settled down in that village itself, with hopes reigning in his heart.

He met the Shabara leader and let him know his intent. He got together an army with the help of the five or six

thousand gold coins that he'd carried with him. Collected arms. He trained the Shabaras in sword fighting to the extent it was possible for him with his wounded hand. In the next one year, paralysis struck, rendering the right half of his body movementless. He took to his bed, and was brought back to his hermitage. Sage Rishabha treated him, helping him stay alive for one more year. The leadership of the army that he'd built fell however on Sagara the dwarf.

Two years elapsed, and the army of Shabaras raided Dasharna. Queen Keshinidevi fled the kingdom along with her brother Karanasimha and went to her father's place at Ahichchatra, leaving her husband behind. Bhadrayu became the king of Dasharna. Vouching that Bhadrayu was a royal scion and that he was Queen Yadavidevi's son, the royal physician got him crowned the king. Queen Yadavidevi was brought to the capital with a show of pomp and glory. Even at the time of her son's coronation, Her Excellency didn't leave her husband alone.

Due both to the blessings of Sage Rishabha and Her Excellency's nursing care, His Serene Majesty recovered a bit, and became capable of stuttering a few words and of turning over on his sides. He felt happy to hear that his own legitimate son had become the king.

Her Excellency Keshinidevi had taken along precious diamonds, emptying the state treasury. Bhadrayu invaded the kingdom of Panchala in the space of just six months, and annexing it, founded the Kurupanchala empire. He then occupied Mahashmathi. He built a navy, and annexing the little kingdoms along the banks of the Ganga, came upto Shravasti.

Sage Vamadeva's message of an invasion from the west thus came true.

However since Queen Purukutsani had made prior preparations, Bhadrayu couldn't conquer Ayodhye.

Contingents of his army descended at eight different places on the banks of the Ganga and marched towards Ayodhye. The Naga bowmen that Queen Purukutsani had hidden away here and there stopped Sagara's soldiers right between the Ganga and the Sarayu before repulsing them.

A contingent of Shabara soldiers however took a detour, and laying siege to the mango orchard, abducted King Purukutsa in a secretive way. His Imperial Majesty then was nestling in the arms of Mriganayane. The fifty soldiers who were his bodyguards were waging a battle on the far banks of the Sarayu. The Shabaras arrowed the six guardsmen to death. They arrested King Purukutsa and Mriganayane, and putting the two astride a horse, took to their heels. The twosome was handed over to Bhadrayu.

Even though Bhadrayu couldn't conquer Ayodhye, he had at least taken its king prisoner. This was his only consolation.

Ayodhye remained unaffected for the next ten years.

King Purukutsa spent the next ten years along with Mriganayane in the prison in Ahichhatra without getting alienated from any joyous gratification, and without any sound or ado.

The citizenry of Ayodhye didn't even know where their king was in custody. All of Tarkshya's efforts proved abortive. Word that His Excellency died in the war started doing the rounds.

There was word too that His Excellency might have been alive. Only, because of Bhadrayu Purukutsani didn't become a widow!

Pleased with Purukutsani's skills of administering a

state, Bhadrayu sent the following message to Purukutsani: "Your marriage is not legal by the Indian tradition. You should marry me. King Purukutsa is here, safe and sound. He has himself consented to our marriage and he suggested himself that we should wed before God Vishwanatha of Kashi. If our two kingdoms unite, the kingdoms of Kashi, Vanga, Anga and Kalinga could unite leading to the founding of a larger *aryavarta* empire."

"Hand over my husband first. We will talk about your proposal afterwards," insisted Purukutsani.

Bhadrayu didn't agree to Purukutsani's suggestion. Ayodhye was an obstacle in his path. Kashi was unavailable if Ayodhye was not got around.

Bhadrayu thought that this was the insult meted out to him by Purukutsani for his disabled condition, and it annoyed him. He married a hundred princesses and begot a hundred children, thus showing the issueless Purukutsani his reproductive prowess. Purukutsani however didn't budge.

PART THREE:TRASADASYU

1

Trasadasyu was Purukutsani's only son.

It was already ten years since Purukutsani's husband had been taken prisoner. Word that King Purukutsa had agreed to it had come along with Bhadrayu's marriage proposal. Purukutsani spurned it with great pride.

The news of Bhadrayu's proposal and of Her Excellency's rejection of it reached the citizens of the town. Men learned in the *shastras*, the priests, ministers, army commanders, civic chiefs, traders assembled in council, conferred with one another about the pros and cons of a Bhadrayu-Purukutsani marriage, discussed every possible standpoint before arriving at a decision. The present marriage of Her Excellency didn't conform to the law of obligatory moral or righteous behaviour, they argued to themselves. Her own husband has agreed to Bhadrayu's proposal. Bhadrayu has proved his reproductive prowess. (He has already had two children.) It is our good fortune that we have escaped an attack by Bhadrayu. We can't face another raid. If the marriage comes off, we could run over the kingdoms of Kashi, Vanga and Kamakhya and found an empire. If Her Excellency consents, King Purukutsa himself would see to the wedding, getting the Kashi priests to agree to officiate in the wedding. What then is the delay for? They had indeed thought that Purukutsani and

Bhadrayu would certainly marry. People who had presided over the conferences of little groups tried to impress upon Her Excellency the decisions of their groups. They prayed to the queen to do her duty and afford the kingdom a legitimate son since she had no legitimate progeny.

Her Excellency had only one reply to give whoever came: Have they seen what had happened? The Dasharna people have taken away the king on the sly. Let them hand him over. Let us know clearly in the presence of all whether His Majesty's consent was his own or driven by the violence meted out to him in the prison. We will see after this is done.

What argument could the people possibly advance to counter this argument?

Her Serene Majesty had her own reasons. The first was Bhadrayu's disabled condition. The two children he had fathered were not disabled, true. But what if, after having come forward and agreed to this dubious marriage, we beget a child who would be the butt of ridicule of the Ayodhye public? Secondly, it would be insulting to put forward a demand as if he has won when in fact I won. Agreeing to it is still baser, not befitting womanhood. Thirdly, what if Purukutsa, having agreed under the duress of torture in the prison, announces in public that the marriage is not agreeable to him.

There were still other unclear reasons natural to a woman. These unwitting unconscious reasons driving her, Purukutsani had sent a reply, which was not agreeable to Bhadrayu.

In case Bhadrayu's attack was successful and laying siege to the palace, he took her away and married her by force, then with no way out she could have agreed. Citizens

wouldn't have taken it amiss. However things didn't happen that way.

Having conquered so much, Bhadrayu will certainly attack Ayodhye over again, Her Excellency told herself wordlessly, falling into a meditation. *We should repulse his attack, no matter what. In case that is not possible, we should establish peace by agreeing to the marriage.* Her Excellency was not prepared to give up the possibility of sacrificing a pawn in exchange for a horse if that could bring some pressure on the king.

The third secret reason was that Bhadrayu already had two wives. She didn't want to become another addition to the list of Bhadrayu's wives, an also-ran. Purukutsani had atleast the opportunity of showing that the kingdom of Ayodhye would be prepared to come to an agreement on its own conditions. It didn't matter who won in case Bhadrayu attacked.

Unfortunately Bhadrayu who was to have become a world-conqueror didn't attack Ayodhye. Ayodhye became his full stop[1]. The discarded pervert Sagara spent eight years in marrying hundred wives. As the hundred children that he begot perished in a jungle fire, he died too due to the same kind of perversion.

Purukutsani's desire for progeny withered away in this manner. No news came about her husband's incarceration.

The frustrated Purukutsani travelled alone to Amaru village and conveyed the news to His Divine Grace Sage

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[1] The original name of Ayodhye was Avadhapuri.It got the honourable name of 'A-yodhya', which means 'un- soldierable', because it was the land even Sagara could not conquer. Scholars think that 'ayodhya' is the word and 'avadha' is its corrupt indigenised form. The word *awadheswari* derives from this.

Devadema. She reminded him of his blessing of 'May you beget a male progeny!' "I don't know if my husband is alive or dead. Citizens are grieving about the king not having a legitimate progeny," she prayed."I may not live long. Please tell me the ways of perpetuating our line."

"You do have the good fortune of having male progeny. You can now perform the ritual of begetting a progeny through other than your husband, the *niyoga yajna*."

"Please do it here. I feel shy there."

"Let us do the sacrificial ritual for the godly pair of maitra-varuna here. A woman can't do it. Get a Brahmin from Ayodhye."

"Won't Kshatriyas do?"

"Kshatriyas will do, but if instead of the sacrifice they are encouraged toward carnal gratification, there will stir in them the ambition of becoming kings themselves. Having said this I will leave it to you. If you get a Brahmin, he can do two kinds of *yajna*."

"Won't the Atharvavedi Brahmins of this region do?"

"Atharvavedis are not staunch devoted Brahmins. Get a worthy one from among the Brahmins there."

"Can't you do?" Her Excellency asked after some mulling.

"Aren't we two related in an equation of the guru and the guru's sister, brother and sister? Besides, there should be no desire in this *yajna*; its sole purpose is healthy progeny. You should get such a steadfast devoted Brahmin."

Purukutsani, who was a person of a fickle, capricious disposition, walked out. Scratching her forehead, she padded up to where the chariot was parked, thinking up

something as she walked. Having grazed their fill, the horses were sleeping chewing the cud.

Waving her hand she called the charioteer. "His Worship has enjoined a maitra-varuna sacrifice to be performed tomorrow. We need eleven Brahmins for that. There are ten Atharvanavedis here. Who are the Brahmins here who know all the four Vedas?"

"I don't know, Your Royal Ladyship! I could tell you that I have seen Simha Bhatta intone a stanza from each of the four Vedas at the time of the final offering into the sacrificial fire."

"Have you? If so, go right away to Ayodhye, and tell him, "Her Excellency has sent for Simha Bhatta. There is a yaga in Amaru village. His Holiness is worried about the lack of one Brahmin", and that he should rightaway go with you. Bring him. As soon as you get back to Ayodhye, change the horses. Holy work, assigned by a guru, shouldn't get delayed because the horses are tired. Get going." She then hurried in, without giving any room for the charioteer to ask questions like what kind of a *yaga* it was, for how many days and so on.

2

When the chariot reached Simha Bhatta's house, it was about two o' clock in the night. Having had his meal, Simha Bhatta was chatting with two of the Brahmins of the Brahmin neighbourhood in the hall. He was fifty years of age. But he looked ten years younger. His was a chiselled face and a glorious voice. Even in chatting he would weigh his words as typical Samavedis do, but the flow of words would be fluent. Even in idle talk, his superiority was

obvious. The charioteer stood at a distance, his hands folded across his torso in deference. Usually charioteers didn't stand like that when they were to convey Her Excellency's call. But today's errand was a bit delicate. The reason for his hesitation was that he had to invite only Simha Bhatta from among a group of two other Brahmins and a four-year-old Brahmin lad.

Simha Bhatta called the charioteer from where he was seated: "Why did you stand right there, Maruti? There is no one here whom you don't know. Come right over and sit!"

Maruti had heard Simha Bhatta, yet he stood, looking at Simha Bhatta intently, as if he hadn't heard him. "I will go myself!" said Simha Bhatta, as he understood the charioteer's signal, got up and asked as he stepped up, "What is it?"

"Her Serene Majesty has sent a message from Amaru. There are ten Brahmins there. She needs one more. She has instructed me to take you right away."

"What is the yaga?"

"I don't know that. Sage Devadema is to perform a yaga with eleven priests. Ten have come. They are one short. He has asked me to get you immediately."

"Why did you stand so far away to say just this? The Brahmin who has just had his meal finds it difficult to get up. Had I been your age, I would have jumped to my feet!"

"Her Royal Ladyship has sent only for you. There are two more with you. That's why I felt diffident."

"Crazy fellow! The priests of Ayodhye don't easily come even when called!" he chattered before he went back to the hall, having a good guffaw about it.

"The great sage Devadema is going to perform a yaga at Amaru, it seems. He is one Brahmin short. Maruthi the charioteer stood at a distance, hesitant to call me because

we were three and a half people sitting there," he announced, and telling his family members about the queenly call, went in to get his *angavastra*, the towelly cloth and *peta*, the headgear.

The other Brahmins looked askance at each other. Bhima Bhatta the staunch Rgvedi Brahmin spoke up: "Did they need Rgvedis for a yaga to be performed by the primitive Atharvavedis? What is their method? What would Simha Bhatta do going there?"

"That is one thing! Let that be. I have seen that village. When I went, there were plenty of snakes there. There used to be invariably two incidents of snakebite every week. In case Simha Bhatta dies of snakebite there, the queen would have to look after his family. O Bhima Bhatta! What yaga could it be which requires a Brahmin from Ayodhye?"

"Which else? If it is eleven Brahmins, it must be the hundred-*chandi* sacrifice. That is a sacrifice typical of the Atharvavedis. Hadn't I asked the question of 'Which Veda talks of the hundred-*chandi* sacrifice?' in a crowded meeting fifteen years ago? The elders were agreed on only three Vedas, calling them 'trayii vidyaa'. Now these Naga Brahmins have got together and created the fourth Veda of Atharvaveda. Our Brahmins also intone those low *mantras* just for the sake of priestly gifts. Ayodhye bristles with Rgvedis just on paper: they jabber *mantras* from Atharvaveda for the priestly presents they get."

"Are you saying Simha Bhatta is not a virtuous, pure-of--heart Brahmin, Bhima Bhatta!?"

"Everyone's the same. Money is all that matters!"

"If the milkman asks for his monthly money, tell him, "Bhatta has gone to Amaru village. He will bring a lot of money by way of (priestly) presents when he returns. Don't

stop your supply of milk. When he comes back, he will give you a week's payment in advance". Don't skimp the milk to be given to the children. Understand?" Simha Bhatta told his family members as he bade them goodbye. Then he stood around to tell Bhima Bhatta and Ahi Bhatta,"I take leave."

"Look, Simha Bhatta! The Brahmins there are uncultured, uncivilized Brahmins. If you utter Rgvedic *mantras* before them, rest assured you are really done for! I will have you boycotted."

Bhima Bhatta took a step forward. "We will have to complain if you are insulted there. You are going to go and sit before some Atharvavedis there. I don't know their ways. I have heard that Brahmins from some petty villages wear their sacrificial threads hanging across their torsos from their right shoulders. Some wear it round their necks like a garland. What is left for us is right for them. Some perform the ritual of sipping water, from their left palm, holding the ladle in the right hand. I don't know which ear they dangle the sacred thread from when there is a death in the house. Tempted by the gifts, you might give up our *samskaras*, be careful!"

"Nothing of that sort is going to happen. I have seen quite a few Naga Brahmins. We learn only the three Vedas. They learn the fourth Veda as well. That is the only difference. When I was in the north in my childhood, I learnt the fourth Veda also. I have lost touch now. But it should be all right in a day or two. The hundred-*chandi* yaga has no use for any Rgvedic *mantra*. I will perform my dawn-, noon- and dusk-adoration of God somewhere else."

"I don't care what you do or don't do. Take along Vrishaja, my son. He will see what you do. He is

habituated to the *mantras* I intone daily. He will quickly recognise any other *mantra* you may jabber."

"Her Majesty has sent only for you!"

"Vrisha has not had the thread-investing ceremony done to him. He is fit to sit with those wild uncivilized Brahmins."

"What if the queen thinks otherwise."

"How would she know our agony?"

"Yes, it would be easy for you if there is a witness. You could transact with us, taking courage from the belief that this lad has seen everything."

"You can take your own son, can't you?"

"He might tell a lie out of fear of his father. Even if you have not tied the tuft on your head into a knot, he might say, 'My father had knotted the tuft like a twine'. Your son's testimony is not valid."

"Look, Bhima! As it is, it is a godforsaken forest which abounds with tigers, leopards, snakes, scorpions and creatures like that. Who will keep a watch on Vrisha when I sit before the sacrificial altar?"

"Simhuu! Take just as much care of Vrisha as you would have of your own son. No more, no less. I have farmed my son out to you. If his limbs remain intact, your work is as good as over. If you can't take even this much care, you go alone. Let my son stay back here. There hasn't been any milk to give him for the last three days. But there is no dearth of rice gruel, beaten rice or *allittu* in our home. You go alone, you don't need anyone as witness. I understand."

"You take him and let him sit on the queen's lap," said Ahi Bhatta a bit crossly. "What will she do? Will she throw him away, the barren bimbo!? Let's see that also."

"All right. Let him come," said Simha Bhatta before turning to Vrishaja. "Come along, Vrisha! Sit in the chariot. Why don't we have another loin-cloth for him?" He then went in himself, and brought his own son's loincloth. Vrisha frisked about joyfully before climbing into the chariot and sitting down in it. Simha Bhatta also got into the chariot with his plate, pot and ladle.

The charioteer who had been sitting in the chariot got down. "Her Majesty has asked us to bring only you."

"This boy hasn't had his thread ceremony yet. He won't sit for the pooje." Answerless, the charioteer got on to the chariot and as he sat down, poked at the horses with the whip.

The horses, fresh from the stable, broke into a gallop, making their way to the Amaru village.

3

The chariot reached the hermitage at the hour preceding sunrise.

The great sage had already had his bath, and having performed his dawn-adoration of god, was into his observance of religious rituals\vows. Her Excellency had spent the night in the hermitage itself, and having got up when the sage did, had had her bath as well. She came out when she heard the chariot pull up. The boy had slept. Simha Bhatta got down from the chariot, carrying the boy.

Her Majesty tried to turn Simha Bhatta's imprudence of bringing along the boy into some sort of humour: "Simha Bhatta the junior! Welcome!"

"It is my mistake, Your Royal Ladyship! Bhima Bhatta was there with me. He has undue suspicions about Naga Brahmins. He has sent his son to be witness to whatever

wrong I may commit during the sacrificial ritual."

"Who is Bhima Bhatta?"

"He is a strict Rigvedi Brahmin. The great scholar who asked fifteen years ago, "Is the mantra uttered during the hundred-*chandi* sacrifice a part of the Rgveda?"! His insistence on *madi* purity leaves one sick and weary though."

"Now that he has come, let him be," said the queen a trifle thickly before she called the charioteer. "You may go back. I am going to be here till the sacrifice ends. If there is any important work, ask Tarkshya to inform me."

She sent Simha Bhatta in even as she stood watching the chariot leave. As the chariot went a few steps, she stopped it by clapping. She walked up to the chariot herself.

"Maruthi, did you see any other chariot on your way here?"

"No, I didn't, Your Excellency!"

"Why is it that he didn't come?"

"Who, Your Royal Ladyship?"

"King Purukutsa," she said, then hated herself for saying it. "Don't tell this to anyone now. I have arranged for the king to be brought here secretly, paying Bhadrayu's guardsmen five thousand *varahas*. Our own Naga soldiers have gone there. In case you see a chariot on your way, stop it to say: "Her Excellency has been looking forward to your arrival since yesterday." Don't say anything more. If you don't spot any chariot, go right ahead to Ayodhye, forgetting about everything."

"Your Royal Ladyship, please listen to a request of mine," submitted Maruthi with great enthusiasm.

"What is it?"

"Let us not send the king back to the prison at

Ahichhatra. In case the Ahichhatrians attack us, we will fight putting our lives on the line."

"Certainly. But if we send to the gallows the security guard who let the prisoner leave the prison after being paid, what do I tell his orphaned wife and children?"

"Your Majesty the Queen's orders", said Maruthi. The queen motioned to him to leave. "Silence for one month," breathed the queen, seeing Maruthi's hangdog face. She then put her finger on her lips, suggesting silence.

The chariot hit its path.

Her Excellency shook her head out of a feeling of dislike and disgust, as she wondered to herself in a wordless aside: How very odd! How apprehensive one has to be of public reproach? How many lies one has to tell? Why should it be so? Has Purukutsa played the role of a husband even once?

Her Worshipful Majesty entered the hermitage, heaving sighs of relief.

Having stopped midway whatever religious ritual/vow he was observing, the great sage was already into a discussion of the socially sanctioned practice of the queen cohabiting with, and begetting progeny from, a man other the king when union with the king had proved fruitless, the *niyoga*, which is a kind of legal adultery. The boy was sleeping right there. She carried him herself into her chambers, and lulled him to sleep.

He has come in order to be witness to this yaga, the queen said to herself wordlessly, giving him an ambivalent gaze of affection and indolent uninterestedness. *I should be careful. Besides, in the event of my becoming a mother, I should have some training in carrying the child, suckling him and lulling him to sleep.*

The boy was sleeping comfortably. The queen put her lips to his chin and pressed them ever so lightly, wanting to find out how kissing small children would be like. The boy was scraggy. He had nothing on except a loincloth. *Do the Ayodhye Brahmins make their children grow lean to this extent,* she asked herself in wordless wonder. *They themselves look so fat and full, don't they?*

She remembered Simha Bhatta. A handsome man, she said to herself, falling into a reflective meditation. But he is a bit old. I got him here because I couldn't think of any other man. The thought of what he might think of her, and that his respect for her might plummet a couple of notches pushed her into a fret of worry. She stood behind the door, wishing to overhear the dialogue between the great patriarchal sage and Simha Bhatta. She didn't mean to spy. It was only a courteous gesture.

"My friends think that there are ten Brahmins here, and I am the eleventh one. They also assume that this sacrificial ritual is a hundred-*chandi yaga*. They have sent this boy to keep an eye on me. Even if he doesn't understand the *mantras*, he can tell one from eleven.

"That is no big deal. Even we haven't performed a hundred-*chandi yaga* for a long time now. If we are doing it at all, let us do it well and according to established procedure. Let it not be a mock effort."

"If you are to invite ten Brahmins, I should be the eleventh one. They should thereafter sit cross-legged for their meal. I would have no place there. I will have to move elsewhere, sit with the queen and offer oblation at the mitra-varuna *yaga*. Both are long-drawn affairs. The noises made at the *yaga* wouldn't be audible to the ones sitting cross-legged for their meal."

"I will see it through to its completion, no matter what. The hundred-*chandi yaga* will be performed at the main hermitage. The *mitra-varuna yaga* could be done in the hut at the other end of the guava grove."

"In case the boy insists on having his meal only with me?"

"Why should he? He may not insist on it if we feed him well in the morning."

"His father has asked him to keep an eye on me about things like the symbolic morsel of food kept apart and dedicated, before starting a meal, to Chitra and Gupta. It is the nature of children to be obstinate about meals.They eat only with people they know well."

"All right. I will take care of even that. You and Her Excellency will have to go without food for eighteen hours every day."

"Please don't worry about me. Going without food is my daily routine. How long Your Royal Ladyship can do without food is my main concern."

"Your Excellency is a Kshatriya. It is in her blood to endure hunger and thirst."

"I hope they won't deem it an insult if I don't eat a meal with your Brahmins."

"Our Brahmins know that Rigvedi Brahmins don't sit with them to take a meal."

"Have you earlier undertaken a *niyoga*?" asked the great sage after a brief silence.

"No, Your Worship! But I have seen *niyogas* being performed. I know the mitra-varuna *mantra*. Yet I am worried.'

"Don't worry! You should imagine Her Excellency to be your wife."

"No matter how we imagine otherwise, is it possible, sir, to forget she is the queen?"

"It is possible.Imagine she is your wife. You shouldn't entertain any other feelings."

"I am unaware and unknowledgeable."

"You have a month's time. Don't worry. All women are like goddesses. The eyes of every woman are like the sun and the moon; shoulders are like the celestial musicians'; breasts are like..."

"I have also read the code of Sage Atri.The problem here is not one of pardon. It is not a problem of purifying a tainted or defiled woman. Her Royal Ladyship is like a goddess, nothing less. We are not equal even to the dirt on her feet.I am not speaking in terms of position. Her qualities as a person are of a high order. She has prevented the state from being orphaned by providing a master: she is veritably Shachidevi*. We should fall at her feet and writhe on them."

"Do that. Even the feet of a woman are erogenous organs. You are gods-on-earth. She is Shachidevi.You take whatever time you need."

"May I ask you about a problem of mine?"

"All right."

"This is a holy *yaga*. It must be successful. But why did you select a poor Brahmin like me for such an important job?"

The patriarchal sage replied with great care. His reply was not expected to dent the dignity of Her Excellency, nor was it to engender a sense of false prestige in him.

"Her Imperial Majesty needs a legitimate heir," he

* Shachidevi is God Indra's wife.

said. "If she doesn't have one, all and sundry would start fighting without a solid reason. The absence of peace for one year withers away the fruits of ten years of peace. It seems when the demand came from Bhadrayu, the citizens had expressed such a wish. Bhadrayu was bragging that he was the father of a hundred sturdy children. But about forty of them were cripples. Nobody was aware of this. It turned out to be good that the choice was left open. Her Excellency arrived only yesterday. I told her a bit thickly that legitimate progeny was essential to repay the paternal debt, following it up with the idea of *niyoga*. That seemed an execrable concept to her. I had to open up for her the whole of the law-book, the code of Hindu law, the *dharmashatra*. We need a man to execute the *yaga*, don't we? To begin with she insisted on a Kshatriya for the job. It is true a Kshatriya fit the bill well. But a Kshatriya prince might stake his claim for permanent kingship. I have seen what would happen if power is split. Bhadrayu grew powerful only because of such a split in power. I said no to her suggestion of a Kshatriya as the master of the practice of *niyoga*. Arrogance shouldn't issue from *niyoga*, you see. "You become the master of *niyoga* yourself," she told me then. This was impossible because she is like a sister to me. Like a real queen, Her Excellency thereupon said it could be a Brahmin conversant with all the four Vedas. Brahmins learn only the three Vedas in Ayodhye. Her Serene Majesty believed devoutly in all the four Vedas. In Amaru however Atharvaveda was the Veda that had the most currency. People who accord importance only to the fourth Veda lack substance and mettle. The charioteer told me you had once recited stanzas from the four Vedas. Naturally then I suggested your name."

"Is *niyoga* possible for a man with the woman he has seen his own mother in?"

"It should happen only with a sense of duty. Sexual lust has almost no place in it. I will advise the queen accordingly. You don't worry."

"My..."

"Don't worry about yourself. A drink of *soma* juice will do for you."

Sage Devadema mixed some medicine with the soma juice that was in a bottle, and as he handed it to Simha Bhatta, said, "You are tired. Drink this. You will feel relaxed. I will wake you up after an hour."

Drinking it, Simha Bhatta fell asleep. Her Excellency stood looking at his sleep-laden face.

Sage Devadema headed off, in order to invite ten Brahmins who knew the hundred-*chandi yaga*.

Queen Purukutsani had never in her life given any man other than her husband an absorbed stare. Simha Bhatta was a handsome man. He was good-looking in every respect except that his hair had greyed because of age. Muscular of build, his was a smile-lit face. With what feelings did she look at the sleeping, helpless poor Brahmin? To say that she looked at him with lustful eyes would be a simplification. To state that she looked with a motherly feeling is something people say about women, which has recently come into vogue. That however is not true. Judging by their dialogue, neither of these feelings would possibly stir in her. She didn't bother to find out whether he was worthy of her. That he was worthy of her was indeed clear. She began to imagine how she, who was an object of such respect and reverence, might be looking, to Simha Bhatta. Having heard him speak of her in terms as

glowing as Devi, Shachi, Maharani, Parvati, and so on, she tried to conceive for herself her picture in his mind.

I am an ordinary woman. I have done, may be, things I shouldn't have in order to establish my authority, she told herself, falling into a meditation before mulling over how she could persuade the hunk in front of her about her ordinariness?

This was not a problem one could understand by means of words. She didn't know any works she could cite to make it clear.

The overriding intent in the way she won over Purukutsa was to achieve his return from other women. There was anger and the abhorrence of power in it, very little of love.

All right, my good guru will worry about me. Why should I rack my brains?, she said to herself, and was about to head off when she noticed that Vrishajana the boy who had got up was giving her a long hard look.

Clever as she was, she took him out saying, "Shush! Simba uncle is asleep.Don't make noise." She fed him with a couple of guava fruit, gave him rockcandy before pumping out every bit of information about himself. *We are five brothers,* Vrishajana said, launching into an account of the state of affairs in his family. *We had no milk for the last four days. Father habitually comes home having squandered away money in gambling. Mother reviles him for this. Not to talk about the sacred thread investiture ceremony, I haven't even had the ritual of the first haircut. They shaved my head without the accompaniment of mantras. Father doesn't bring me any clothes except the skimpy langoti that covers only the privates. Beside the work of pooje in the temple, pimping for prostitutes is my*

father's only source of income. Sometimes when he doesn't hand over the money that he gets from harlots, they come home and wrangle with father. One day a prostitute even took away father's dhotra that had been hung out to dry. Father went to do his temple-duties that day, with an old faded dhotra on. Father bashes up mother whenever he is tight with the inebriating opium, and mother weeps before taking it out on us the children, catching us a couple on our backs. Vrishajana, the four year old religiously recounted all this to Her Excellency, as if reciting that which is committed to memory, just for rock candy.

As Purukutsani listened to him, some conclusions formed in her mind. They were: the four-year-old was prematurely old. Hearing the words being exchanged at home, compassion natural to man has decreased in him. He is mentally sharp, but has a weak body. He is therefore ineffectual despite his vast knowledge. He who does his own father down must be cruel and murderous.

Only poverty cannot be the reason for all this, she told herself in a wordless rumination. *He knows everything about prostitutes. Although one cannot say whether he would turn out to be a lecher, he has a light loose tongue. He has the habit of colouring and embroidering things before letting on. He may not have divulged all this just for the lure of rockcandy. He let on the happenings in his family to earn the sympathy of his interlocutors. This is not the sign just of poverty. It is a hint of premature senility.*

He has no wisdom and discrimination. He, who has come to find out things for his father, talks so lightly of his father.

In a word, the boy is but four-year old, but the way he is behaving, one gets the feeling that he belongs to the lineage of the venomous chinigi snake.

The things that he hasn't said about his father could be used as medicine for the sickeningly disfigured life of his father.

Her Excellency hadn't brought her servants this time. Holding Vrisha by the hand she herself took him round the garden. There were no marbles to play with, but there was no dearth of the flat stones with which one played the game of aiming at and throwing, seeking to bring down a distant pile of stones, the game of *ottappa*. Purukutsani who was a tomboy in her childhood hadn't forgotten the art of her game. She had Vrisha play to begin with. Then she went off to a distance to play the game. She threw the stone six times and all the six times she hit the target group of stones.

Devadema the great sage returned, and seeing the queen's expertise at the game emerged from behind a tree. "Well done!" he commended, clapping and smiling. Purukutsani grew bashful because the sage had seen her tomboyishness.

"Everything is ready, girl! Only one thing had remained viz. telling you the pithy maxim of the night. I came over now thinking that I wouldn't have time to tell you later. After seeing your game I think there is no need for it." he gurgled, beaming a smile.

"May Your Worship please do the telling!" submitted Her Excellency as she told Vrisha to get on with the game and walked up to His Worship.

"There is no need for it. You know it better."

"Please tell me, Your Worship!"

"You meditate on maitra-varuna. Keep uttering your husband's name. As long as it pleases you, utter 'Purukutsa', 'Maharaja', and 'Maitra-varuni'. You should be aware that you are remembering only your husband.

Besides, the master of *niyoga* should also get to know this."

"What you are saying is right on the mark, Your Worship!"

"You want a son, who resembles either you or your husband, don't you?"

"Yes, Your Worship!"

"So be it! Everything will go well!"

Vrisha saw her pay her respects to the ascetic sage from a distance. He got on with the game.

4

Both the sacrifices of the day ended smoothly.

Holding the vessel of *bella hittu*, Vrisha was sitting at the sacrificial site, much like the great Daksha, Lord Brahma's son who once performed a great sacrifice to obtain a son. He was surprised to see Naga Brahmins were very much like the Ayodhye Brahmins. The sacred threads of all of them dangled across their torsoes from their left shoulders. No one had worn it, like a garland, round his neck. When they did the ritual of sipping water, they did it with their right hands, holding the ladle in their left hands.

However, they pronounced 'a' as 'oo'. Initially Simha Bhatta also pronounced the a's as a's when he jabbered his *mantras*. But he found it expedient to say 'oo' when the choral chanting started. Vrisha, who was sitting behind, said in a corrective little scream that it was *asyavamadevasya*, and not *oosyavamadevasya*.

All the Brahmins beamed an amused smile. Vrisha puffed with pride. Swaying from left to right, he started munching on his *bella hittu* with a swagger.

Her Excellency was Vrisha's favourite playmate. Even

as she signalled to him, he ran out with the vessel in hand.

The game of *ottappa*, which is a game of a stone slab thrown from a distance to hit a pile of stones, began. "Wait! I will finish eating this."

"This time I will throw the stone! " said Purukutsani. Till he was done eating, she penetrated the target group of stones another six times with the large flat stone.

Then Vrisha started playing, throwing the stone just from where Her Excellency stood. The flat stone flew just a couple of steps before dipping. The queen took him by the hand and stood him barely two steps away from the target stones as she said, "Stand near". Even then Vrisha failed to hit the target.

In the meantime Kalia's son Bakhia had come with two of his friends, and stood watching the game. They started laughing derisively at Vrisha's failed attempts. "Why laugh Bakhia? You play and hit the target, let's see!" suggested Her Royal Highness.

Bakhia's very first attempt was successful.

Seething with envy, Vrisha flew at him and started wrestling.

"Only if you play together amicably, I will let Vrisha be here," said the queen. "Or else he will go inside."

"I will play," submitted Vrisha.

"Play. Don't quarrel," said the queen as she got them together and made them shake hands. Then she left for the *yaga*. "Tomorrow you should bring Vrisha marbles for playing, Bakhia!" she added before leaving.

The *yaga* went on unimpeded.

After the sacrificial ritual the ten Brahmins sat cross-legged for their meal. Vrisha was inordinately hungry.

"I have to eat only in the evening. Will you eat now or in the evening?" Simha Bhatta asked Vrisha.

"Right now!" said Vrisha warming to the smell of the dishes.

"Can this boy sit with you to eat? I haven't had my daily religious routine."

"By all means," said the Brahmins by way of an answer.

He was given a leaf to eat from. 'The Naga Brahmins also ritually sprinkle water around the eating leaf before the meal is eaten like my own father, but they use only two big palmfuls of the boiled rice morsel for offering to Chitra and Gupta before the meal,' noted Vrisha, who was to report these things to his father.

Simha Bhatta walked quietly from the backdoor into the hut, which was in a corner. He prepared the platform, putting together some bricks. He lit the sacrificial fire, and sat waiting for Her Royal Excellency.

"Haven't you started the *homa* as yet?" Purukutsani asked as soon as she arrived.

"We were waiting for you to come and make the sacrificial fire. You had to start it, hadn't you, Your Excellency?"

"All right. This is *akshate*. This is oblation. This is oblatory ghee," she declared as she put each of them into the sacrificial fire. Then she added, "Now you start your *homa*. At this rate you won't be able to have your meals even by the evening."

Simha Bhatta began to intone the *homa mantras* in a soft voice. Purukutsani happened to be touching his shoulder each time he took out the oblatory material from

the mud-pot and gave her.

No matter how fast they did it, it was evening by the time the final offering was chucked into the fire. Simha Bhatta who had put down his face couldn't move up his eyes and look at the queen. This despite the fact they were all alone in the hut for as long as six hours.

It need hardly be said that all offerings were thrown into the fire in the name of King Purukutsa and Queen Purukutsani. Simha Bhatta only assumed the dedicated position of the officiating priest.

As soon as Vrisha fell asleep, Simha Bhatta got up quietly and walked toward the room where her Excellency was sleeping. Purukutsani was still sitting on the bed.

"Your Excellency! I am an ignoramus in this matter," submitted Simha Bhatta the Brahmin, still standing, his voice soft and submissive. "The fear that I might cause you dishonour haunts me. So you should order me like a guru. You should receive this as my service!"

"What is your wife's name?"

"Kripe"

"Do you call her so?"

"I call her Kripane just for fun"

"What does she call you when the two of you are alone?"

"She calls me Chimboo, Chimma, Chimbaraja. She doesn't call me by name when face to face."

"Remember, my name is Kripa or Kripana. I will call you 'maharaja'. Is that all right?"

"All right. Now I will touch you at places I like. Then it is upto you to get served by me the way you like."

He then went on to bend forward, put her feet on his thigh before stroking them ever so softly. He pressed her

feet and her heels to his chest. "Your Royal Ladyship! Your Royal ladyship!" he exuded.

"I am not Your Royal Ladyship.I am Kripana Devi," reminded Her Excellency as she lifted his arms and sat him beside her. "You do to me whatever she wanted done to her," she said.

Simha Bhatta began to undress her. When this was being done, the queen was into kissing him with torrid gut-busting passion.

5

"This woman plays *ottappa* very well," said Vrisha.

"She is not just a woman, you flaming fool! She is the queen," corrected Bakhia.

"Oh dear! Is she the queen? Why did she prepare me *bella hittu*?"

"None of her maids has come with her this time. She must have given you *bella hittu* to eat because you are Bhima Bhatta's son."

"We should see her game once again, Bakhia!"

"Let's go search for her. By virtue of being a guest of the hermitage you can go wherever you want to go."

In the afternoon all the four scoured hut after hut, looking for the queen. They saw Simha Bhatta doing the *homa* and the queen touching his forearm whenever he threw the offering into the fire.

The four boys returned quietly, so as not to disturb the *homa*. This scene sat deeply etched in Vrisha's memory-screen. He didn't however understand its meaning. All he understood was that Simha Bhatta was

performing some *homa* on Her Excellency's behalf. The events that took place after that were blotted out by other memories.

The damp nights of the hills, the torrid heat of the day, eating daily the guavas filched on the sly, meals guzzled greedily, drinking water from the brooks of the hills - all this led to Vrisha contracting intermittent fever. Simha Bhatta's courage nosedived. In order to attend to him, the queen got Kalia's mother to stay at the hermitage. His health getting worse in two or three days, Vrisha started to rave. The great Sage Devadema knew medicine. "This is the kind of fever that lasts either ten days or twenty-one days. Trying to bring it down suddenly leads to exacerbation," he said. But this didn't satisfy Simha Bhatta," I will go myself and farm him out to Bhima Bhatta." he submitted to Her Excellency one night. "My responsibility has augmented. "Does Bhima Bhatta know how to raise children?", tossed back the queen before she related the story that Vrisha had told her about Bhima Bhatta. "It is true that he is a gambler. But no matter what the other things might be, I have to do my duty." Simha Bhatta broached this to Sage Devadema the following day. "Travelling by chariot in this condition is fraught with risks. All the intestines would have been affected. Why do you worry about him? Leave it to me."

These words drew the curtain on the problem.

In the next fifteen days the news of King Purukutsa's release for a month hung thickly in the air across Ayodhye. The queen told the charioteer. Whispering into his ear that he shouldn't let it on, the charioteer told an elephant-driver of the elephant-shed. The elephant-driver told his wife what he had been told.She in her turn told this to a

prostitute friend of hers. The harlot was the lover of one of the premier's accountants. She asked him if the premier had paid a bribe of five thousand *varahas* and sent a servant to bring King Purkutsa to Amaru for a month. She had in addition argued that Guru Vrishabhadeva himself had persuaded Bhadrayu to send the king to Amaru for a month in the interest of the perpetuation of the line, that he had a very righteous kind of mind and that it was unlikely that he had paid some hush money to watchmen. Thinking that if he told this to the premier, his status and prestige would go up, the accountant told this to the premier. The Prime Minister sent for Tarkshya assuming Tarkshya would know such things. Tarkshya was sharp and clever. But he was arrogance personified. Two-edged questions like 'Who did you give that money to?', 'To which guardsmen?' that the premier asked Tarkshya hurt him. Her Excellency would usually assign such tasks to him, an intrigued Tarkshya found himself being badgered by questions. When such was the case, why didn't she assign it to him? Had he been ignored? What crime did he commit? Going by the way the premier was asking the questions, it seemed to Tarkshya that the premier was closer to Her Excellency than himself. The premier knew something that he didn't.

However he wasn't prepared to let out his lack of knowledge.

"How did you come to know it?" he asked back.

'This means that Tarkshya is in agreement with the truth of this news' thought the premier before he sent for the accountant.

Demurring to let the people in on his tryst with the harlot, the accountant shot back at Tarkshya, "The town is abuzz with the news, didn't you hear?"

"This is a personal matter of Her Excellency. We shouldn't let this on till His Excellency is returned to Her Excellency!" said Tarkshya.

Since Tarkshya the man with the greatest of noses for news himself said that, the feeling that the news must be true gained strength in their minds. The premier and the accountant began to tell this to the members of their households and intimate friends, prefacing their words with "Don't let this on!" Word of the news thus spread in the whole town. It reached Bhima Bhatta's ears too. He in his turn began to tell everyone,"That I sent Vrisha was an act of wisdom!"

A desire to verify it stirred in Tarkshya whereupon he got on to his horse one day and headed rapidly to Amaru alone.

* * * *

The *yaga* was about to end.

The Great Sage looked subtly and indirectly for possible changes in Her Excellency's body. It was in a way her test-by-fire. Besides, once in a while, he examined from a distance the smell that emanated from her bathroom. It seemed to him that a sweet new smell issued from her bathroom on the twentieth day after the *yaga* began. He examined the smell for another two days on some excuse or another. His spirits rose.

He called Her Imperial Majesty aside on the twentieth day and congratulated her. "What is it, a boy or a girl?" asked the queen. "Boy!" said the ascetic renunciate. He ground a herb and gave the juice to the queen to drink. Her Excellency ingested it thinking it was for the foetus's health. The purpose behind Sage Devadema's offer of the drink was however different. The herb had the ability to do

away with any desire that the queen might have had of mating with a man.

The sage called Simha Bhatta to tell him, "The *yaga* has been successful." Simha Bhatta had by then already grown enamoured of Her Excellency. "There are still five days to go, Your Worship, before the last offering is thrown into the sacrificial fire."

"Today is a new moon day. There are only four days. I give you three days for subduing your senses. Your fondness for the queen should disappear in three days. Keep away from the queen after you get back to Ayodhye. Develop love for your wife. This is the only anxiety in *niyoga*. You are a good Brahmin. Stay detached from this bond"

"Yes, Your Worship! It is true that I did develop a very subtle kind of love for the queen. But how did you get to know it, can I ask? Has there been any improper conduct except in the night?"

"Nothing like that. The fickleness in your eyes gave rise to that feeling, that's all."

"Does that mean that I was looking at Her Excellency with fickle desire?"

"You were not. But you were putting down your head in order to suppress such fickleness, weren't you? Excessive bashfulness is also a sign of fickle desire."

"Can I leave tomorrow?"

"Even if you go, you will carry your covert desires with you. Her Excellency's desires might be aroused when you leave. You drink this medicine without the *soma* juice and mate with Her Majesty. You will feel fed up. And so will the queen. There is even the possibility then of a quarrel between you two. See that you don't quarrel. You

have to live in Ayodhye, haven't you?"

What would be my lot, Simha Bhatta thought to himself, *if I quarrel with Queen Purukutsani?*

"Why would there be a quarrel, Your Worship?" he asked.

"Carnal desire is like that. Anger is its culminating point!"

Telling the queen that night that they would be together for three more days, Simha Bhatta requested her that in case, in his love for the queen, he had exceeded the limits and done any wrong, she should grant him pardon, and not get angry. The two of them slept on the same bed. Inactively. Simha Bhatta however couldn't hold back his bubbling infatuation for the queen. "You are as beautiful as a celestial nymph, *mahadevi*!" he burst forth excitedly. "Even though I enjoyed you all these days, I haven't quite seen you in all your bodily beauty. I long to see you in your entirety. May you let me see all of your beauty today."

"Why not?" agreed Her Excellency before lying completely naked.

Standing at a distance, Simha Bhatta looked absorbedly at her naked frame from top to toe. "*Aha*! This is Shachidevi's all-inclusively cosmic manifestation! Even Indra's hundred eyes are not enough to savour it!" he accoladed, the words tripping off his tongue in full-throated exuberance.

"Why would the gods-on-earth want the status of god Indra?" the queen asked rhetorically. Simha Bhatta bit his tongue in regret.

The following day Simha Bhatta submitted, "Just two more days, *mahadevi*! I have this desire to kiss my child in your womb for the last time!"

"All right. But the child is not yours. I called you 'Chimboo' just to drive away your inhibitions. But I was thinking only of King Purukutsa. The child is the king's, belongs to Mitra-Varuna lineage. What is the purpose of the *yaga*? You were only an officiating priest," said the queen before setting aside her saree-end covering her belly. Simha Bhatta kissed her navel with the attachment of a father before he stroked the nether part of her belly. His hand didn't feel anything. "Yes", he sighed. "Idam na mama," which is Sanskrit for 'it's not mine, (it's the king's)'

The last offering was thrown into the fire the following day.

Simha Bhatta said in the night: "I want to go back just as I came here. Let me keep your feet on my chest and stroke them."

"That's good!" said the queen before she placed both her feet on his chest. Simha Bhatta stroked and kissed her feet, then, saying, 'I will take leave", went out and slept on the stone slab opposite the entrance door of the hut in that cold weather.

Tarkshya arrived at the hut in the hour preceding sunrise, the *brahmi* muhurta. Pushing aside the overcloth, the *uttariya* that Simha Bhatta had covered himself with, Tarkshya saw Simha Bhatta shivering in the cold. But thinking better of waking him up, he entered the hut. Of all people in the hermitage only the renunciate sage was up, and was into his observance of religious rituals. "Has the queen got up?" asked Tarkshya. The sage gestured to say 'no' before having him sit right there. Then he went out to put away the sacrifice offered to God Vaishwadeva. Seeing Simha Bhatta sleeping there he heaved a sigh of relieved satisfaction before walking away to the hut in which Queen

Purkutsani was sleeping."Tarkshya has come," he told the queen, who had just woken up. "The queen has just woken up. She might come here now," he told Tarkshya when he came back. "You be seated here. You could go over and see her after an hour. She sleeps in the fifth hut."

"Had King Purukutsa come here?" Tarkshya started his enquiries.

"Yes, he had. He went away three days back, after finishing the yaga."

"Which *yaga*?"

"The *yaga* for male progeny." This was true too!

Tarkshya sat silent for a while, then asked, "Didn't you ask him to stay back here? Bhadrayu has now vanquished even Magadha."

"That is upto the queen," replied His Divine Grace.

Dressed in fresh clothes, Her Majesty came there, a hearty smile playing on her face.

"What is the news?" she asked.

"News has come from Ahichchatra that although Bhadrayu has won a victory over Magadha, he has lost considerable army personnel. He has now beaten a retreat, and would be happy if he could save Dasharna. Princes of kingdoms he vanquished have come back to the helm in their kingdoms. In Shravasti a Yadava prince has ascended the throne. Subhanu the Shravasti king has died in the war. Some villages are fighting with Subhanu's elder son in the lead. Bhillas are helping the Yadavas. Four of our villages are asking us as to what to do."

"Send them word that they shouldn't side with any one, and that they should secure only our borders."

Tarkshya nodded his head in appreciation of Her

Excellency's quicksilver intellect. The queen's intention was that the vanquished prince of Shravasti shouldn't move in Ayodhye's direction.

"Rukmangada has assumed command of Ahichchatra with the consent of the citizens it seems," Tarkshya broached Ahichchatra again. "I have heard he is a virtuous man. He even conducts religious discourses."

"Let's see. After six months you could take the eighth deputy Prime Minister and an Ayodhye pandit to Ahichchatra. Leaving them for a discussion of issues having to do with *dharma*, you should secretly figure out the structure of the prison, draw up a map of it and identify the exact location of the king's cell. Ask them to work out a compromise before you return."

"I only hope His Highness is doing fine. Is he?" Tarkshya's was a double-edged question.

"Yes, he is fine. Is King Rukmangada married?"

"No, he isn't."

"That's good. If he gets married and begets a daughter, my son could marry her, and that way we would have a daughter-in-law. Ahichchatra would be related to Ayodhye by blood." Her Highness beamed a luminous gushing smile as she said this.

Two and a half answers to a double-edged question!

Tarkshya didn't gather the courage to ask any more questions. His heart flooded with joy, he stepped back two paces before unsheathing his sword. Laying the sword down, and lying prostrate he kissed the sharp edge of the sword as he exclaimed, "My salutations to Her Majesty, the queen of Ayodhye and the prince of Ayodhye!"

Then he breathed in a soft mellow voice, "Your Royal

Ladyship! I've grown old. I want to retire and cultivate land in North Kosala."

"Why do you say that? Did the premier insult you when I wasn't around?"

"I wasn't insulted, Your Majesty! I am Tarkshya by name and by profession. A tarkshya who doesn't get to know the news circulating in town is as good as dead. I didn't know the news that the premier's accountant knew. Isn't this because of my age?"

"I will afford you an opportunity to display your skills of dare-devilry and adventure. Don't worry. You just have to wait for six months. That's all."

Both went off to see His Worship Sage Devadema.

"It will be still a few days before Vrisha sets out on his journey. Send the chariot for Simha Bhatta. He has to go right away to tell his father about Vrisha's indisposition. He has to say Vrisha would come with Her Excellency after recovering his health."

Simha Bhatta came to see the sage, shivering badly because of the cold weather.

"The *yaga* that the you performed must have hotted you up. You seem thus to have enjoyed the cold weather." Tarkshya ribbed him.

"That is always there for priests!" bantered the Bhatta.

Tarkshya got on to his horse and headed towards Ayodhye to convey the glad tidings.

6

When after about five days Her Excellency arrived in Ayodhye along with Vrisha, the town had been decked up and decorated for her welcome. People thronging the

streets and lanes were shouting cries of victory. The streets rang with auspicious instrumental music. The atmosphere throbbed with the bustle of festive gaiety. Married women stopped the chariot, waved a platter of flaming camphor downwards in front of the queen, filled the saree-end at her waist before distributing vermilion, turmeric and betel leaves and areca nuts. At the Vasanthika temple the queen was greeted with the recitation of Vedic hymns. Along with the other Brahmins, Simha Bhatta blessed her with his uninterrupted recitation of Vedic hymns.

Vrisha ran quietly to his father and held fast his legs. Stepping toward them, Her Excellency made fun of Vrisha, whispering into his ears: "You little rascal! You have got yourself treated by me all these days, and now you want your father. Come! Let's play *ottappa*!" But Vrisha didn't show his face that had been buried in his father's *dhotra*.

The queen sent for Bhima Bhatta. Bhima Bhatta, sensing his door of fortune open, ran toward the palace. Her Excellency was in an excited mood. "Your son Vrisha is very smart," she effused before she laid out all the complaints that Vrisha had told her, then went on: " I don't like Vedic Brahmins who can't look after their wives and children to stay in Ayodhye. The Brahmins of Ayodhye shouldn't be known as people who get by with the earnings of prostitutes. If your conduct doesn't get simpler than it is now, I will have to send you out as priests in the Vindhyachalavasini temple. Do you want this or that? Tell me straight, don't hedge!"

Bhima Bhatta started trembling because of the dread of wild animals in the woods. "Please do pardon me," he requested.

"It seems your children don't have milk to drink. I will

pay from the treasury now and arrange for their milk for a year. We will deduct this from your annual allowance in two instalments. Would that be all right?" she asked.

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

"It is not our intention to grab money from you people. You think yourselves about how to live your lives, looking after your wives and children. Send Vrisha to the palace once in two or three months. Let him report to me about you people. The boy is smart!"

Bhima Bhatta, who tottered because of this fear, forgot to listen to Vrisha's report about the Amaru village.

Vrisha began to visit the palace not once in two months, but every day. Her Excellency started to spend her days of pregnancy with its concomitant cravings and longings, playing *ottappa* with Vrisha.

Whenever the premier, Tarkshya and the representatives came over and stood outside the palace waiting to see the queen, they were met with statements like "Her Excellency is playing *ottappa*", "Her Royal Ladyship is playing top", "The queen is playing tipcat" and "Her Majesty is playing hopscotch". Frustrated, the premier then fixed a day in the week as the day of longing before instructing his officers not to have any important work on that day.

7

On the fifth day in the month of *Vaishakha* in the year of *Krodhananama*, when the *mitra* and *mithuna* stars were in the ascendancy, Her Excellency had the good fortune of giving birth to a baby boy but not without some exertion.

She ushered a bonny little baby on to planet earth after remembering Mitra and Varuna, husband Purukutsa and the spiritual preceptors Vamadeva-Devadema, and undergoing labour for three hours. The news was tomtommed in the town. Since the letter 'tra' was indicated according to the star under which the child was born, he was named *Trasadasyu* at the naming ceremony on the twelfth day. Celebratory sugar, sweetmeats and (priestly) presents were distributed in the town.

Five days before the naming ceremony, Bhima Bhatta had the first haircut done to two of his children who hadn't had their first haircuts. The very next day he made all of his children worthy of receiving charitable gifts by administering the Vedic *gayatri mantra* at the thread-investing ceremony. If questioned, he would revile them with, " You people are all vile fellows! You call yourselves Rigvedins but perform the hundred-*chandi homa*!" before citing as the basis of what he was doing something in some corner of the *shastras*. Nobody mustered the courage to stop him. They would laugh at him behind his back. All the five children sat cross-legged in a row to take their meals. Seeing them, Her Excellency felt satisfied that her words had gone home. She called Bhima Bhatta's wife over, gave her a saree, handed Vrisha a long loose outer garment, a *dhotra* and an *angavastra* as priestly present. Her Majesty told Bhima Bhatta's wife, "I hope your husband's *dhotra* has stopped being stolen, has it?" Feeling ashamed and growing red in the face, Bhima Bhatta's wife crowed, " My husband is onto the right path because of your kindness. Our children got to drink milk. They came to have their first hair-cuts and their thread- investing ceremonies."

Vrisha, who had recovered from malaria, grew like the proverbial anthill. Sporting a hair-tuft as large as cow's

foot, he stood behind his mother like a steadfast devoted bachelor. Lunging forward with the shirt and the *dhotra* that he had been gifted, and planting himself before the queen, he asked her, "Do I look like my father, Your Worshipful Majesty?" "You also become a *ghanapathi* like your father!" she told him as she gently stroked his body. Looking at it from a distance, Bhima Bhatta spoke with a swagger, "Even though the queen is an Atharvavedin, she knows so much of the mysteries of Rigveda which our hundred-*chandins* don't know!"

Stepping up, Her Excellency stood near Bhima Bhatta's wife, and said: "Don't go away yet. Take the present before you leave."

After all married women left, the queen called Simha Bhatta's wife inside. She washed her feet and drank the wash. "You should have come too for our Maitra Varuna *yaga*. I omitted to call you because of the rush. Simha Bhatta himself presided over the sacrifice and conducted it smoothly. Kripadevi, please do me a favour by accepting this festive present. Don't say no. The sin of separating you two shouldn't accrue to me!" So saying she put the closed gift on the head of a servant and sent her off. When, back at home, Simha Bhatta's wife opened the wooden container what should she see there: a golden braid-like ornament, a golden girdle, a silk cloth, and green bangles! Kripa Devi was delighted, feeling proud as she did of her husband. "Did you do such a big *yaga* alone?" she asked.

"Yes. That is a *yaga* one does alone!" replied Simha Bhatta in perfect earnest. After a while, he asked, " Did Her Excellency call you Kripana Devi?"

"No, she didn't. You distort my name and call me like that. The queen called me Kripa Devi."

Simha Bhatta heaved a relieved sigh. This astonished Kripa Devi.

"How did Her Majesty come to know my name?" she asked.

"She wanted to call you, but there was no time. She asked your name then."

8

It was the initial days of Her Excellency's pregnancy. Within six to eight months of the birth of the child, word of Bhadrayu's ambition of a world conquest began to be heard. The first hints of the Dasharajna war were visible in Shravasti. Besides, envying the peaceful law and order situation obtaining in Ayodhye, the king of Kashi raided Ayodhye. ' Since Ayodhye has no heirs, Ayodhye would be mine tomorrow if not today.' thought the Kashi king. The birth of an heir enraged him. Thinking that that was the right time to annex it, he attacked Ayodhye. Moreover the Yadavas were their distant relatives. The Kashi king also belonged to the caste of cowherds. It was the Kashi king himself who helped the exiled prince of Dwarake to be crowned the king. 'Ayodhye is caught now in a cleft stick. Only the queen is there now. The prince is still a child. I should strike while the iron is hot,' the king told himself in great self-confidence before invading Ayodhye.

The political circumstances suited him. He sent representatives off to Shravasti and asked the Yadavas there to raid Ayodhye from the south. He also put forward a condition, which was: "Four villages on the banks of the Ganga have gone to Ayodhye because of a woman. If we win this war, we will let you take possession of the

southern part of Ayodhye. You should let us rule the northern part." In its enthusiasm to pay back the help, pat came the reply from Shravasti: "I will send our army immediately."

Purukutsani was worried. In paying attention to the west, the east had been neglected. There were not many Ayodhye troops. Many of the troops were posted around the woods. In the north some were around Amaru. The queen hadn't expected the attack from Kashi. The kingdom of Kashi had the reputation of not poking its nose in the affairs of other kingdoms. It was a treasure house of learning, art and philosophy. That wars were alien to the Kashi people was the putative perception. This had now been belied.

Word of the offensives from both the sides spread in Ayodhye.

On the-mud-and-stone seat beside the Vasanthikadevi temple, Bhima Bhatta started to prattle with four of the mischievous brats, regular members of the hangout: "I will see what the queen will do now. The Kashi king is a Rigvedi!" His rage had doubled because of the goodies that Simha Bhatta's wife had been generously given as festive gifts.

Her Majesty sent an instruction to her army on the Shravasti border to be on high alert. What about the eastern border? She sat alone wrapped in thought. Two things appeared to her very distinct.

It would be a waste of time to move the army contingent that was in the west to the east. She should equip the people in the east and they, sitting in strategic places, should trouble the raiding enemy, hampering its progress. She entrusted this task to Tarkshya. Agreeing to this with alacrity, Tarkshya proceeded in the eastern

direction. Cartloads of arms followed him. Even with all this the queen wasn't satisfied.

She sent a representative scurrying to Amaru. In Amaru was Kalia's competent army contingent.

There were big royal highways from Amaru to North Kosala. The instruction to her representative was clear: "Kalia's army should cross Northern Kosala in the night itself, and taking the path through the woods, travel four *haradaris* before resting in the east of Kashi. After taking a day's rest, he should attack the city of Kashi. They should not take the royal highway from North Kosala." This royal highway went round and round to reach the north of Kashi. According to the queen's command, one could mount an unexpected attack on Kashi from its east.

The queen did another clever thing. Veerasena was well known to the Bhillas. She sent a message to the Bhillas living on the shores of the Mahanira through him. That was: "Your king is living in style in Ayodhye with six of your leaders. But he is in the queen's custody. Besides, a hundred Bhilla families are living in great comfort in seven forests. If they are dear to you, you should not help the Shravasti army. If possible, you should trouble the small contingents of the Shravasti army. Our queen has protected you people from the old kings of Shravasti. Think it over."

Bhillas were the dominant group in the present Shravasti army. It was because of their hatred for Shravasti that they had joined the army of the Yadava king. Veerasena broadcast Her Excellency's message along the banks of the Mahanira. The Bhillas there relayed it to their people elsewhere. The Yadava king of Shravasti of course sent an order for the gathering and accumulation of the army. No new soldiers came. Half of the Bhilla army that was there

dissolved right there. The rest of the battalions were sent off to the forests.

Tarkshya who went distributing arms in village after village came to know some strange news from his intelligence men. The news was the order that the Kashi king had issued: 'why should the soldiers march on the roads and get fatigued? We have the Ganga river! Let half of the soldiers take the road, and rest near the Nandi village. The rest should travel by rafts on the river and, on reaching the Nandi village, walk toward Ayodhye. Having taken some rest the foot soldiers should besiege Ayodhye from the east." Tarkshya had never thought that the Kashi king would do such a stupid thing. 'Let the soldiers go to Nandi and rest there,' he started to think, 'We have enough troops there to tackle them. I will have achieved my aim if I take care of the armed force that travels in rafts.' At the spot where the Ganga and the Gandaki meet, the speed of vessels gets adversely affected because of the countercurrent. There is a bend in the river at a distance of about thirty *yojanas* from Kashi. At a distance of forty *yojanas* a secret current of the Saraswati River joins the river. It would be enough if I muster my people at these three strategic points.' Accordingly Tarkshya went over to villages, and distributing bows and arrows and saying, 'Take aim, kill the boatmen and disappear into the woods', returned.

The Ganga's is a vast channel. Tens of hundreds of boats can sail at the same time. However they should travel against the stream. The Kashi king sat in a beautiful ship. He had appointed a skilled oarsman to steer his vessel. Some three hundred Navy vessels led by the king were on the military expedition. The king's ship was right in the

midst of the flotilla. At the place the Gandaki River met the Ganga, fifty of Tarkshya's bowmen stood waiting under the cover of the woods. Ten boatmen perished in the first attack. When the soldiers from these vessels jumped from the ships and were trying to swim to safety, the archers began to unleash arrows. The hundred soldiers who stood behind these bowmen and who were armed with swords let these soldiers reach the shore before hacking them dead and disappearing into the woods. They joined the muster of people waiting at the next turn. Tarkshya himself was with this muster. He gave them a congratulatory pat on the back.

The king of Kashi was completely downcast seeing hundreds of his men being massacred in front of his own eyes. 'Some clever man has thought up this wicked idea.' he thought to himself in a wordless aside. 'Only Tarkshya, and none else, could have thought of this plan of killing the boatmen, and killing them as the vessels went out of control and the soldiers jumped into the waters and swam for life.' He consulted his commanders. The main problem with the traffic of the vessels struck him now. In the meantime a messenger came on horseback. He shouted from where he stood: "Your Highness! About five hundred Naga soldiers from the east have come and are looting Kashi!" The king was flabbergasted. "From the east?" wondered the intrigued king. "Nagas? Are they from Pragjothisha?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, seeing that there are no soldiers in Kashi, some marauders seem to have attacked Kashi. They are plundering houses, shops and whatever they can lay their hands on. Some have laid siege to the palace. They have arrested the treasurer."

While the king thus sat dazed, the sailor of the leading

vessel of the flotilla told the other sailors to stay where they were before he came speeding downstream to the king's vessel.

"Your Highness! There is a bend further up where the channel is very narrow. All the vessels have to per force crowd together there. The bowmen are killing the boatmen first. If you wish we will stop the ships right here. There seems to be trouble waiting for us at the bend. I thought I saw some white clothes in the forest off the shore there. I came away to get His Majesty's orders. All the ships are now at a standstill."

From the stationary vessels the king and his commanders took an observant look at the two paths of that bend. They sighted a few bowmen who were perched on trees.

The king never thought he would find himself face to face with such difficulties so easily. Anxiety about wives and children enveloped everyone. Besides, the king was apprehensive that there might be an easy massacre of his men. Yet he couldn't speak a word.

"How about returning to Kashi?" he suggested dubiously.

"That doesn't appeal to us. We should get on the shore and first of all drive the bowmen away," put in a commander.

A second one spurted: "There may be Tarkshya among them. Who knows what other machination he is up to."

"Whatever that be, let the boats not go in a group at the bend. If they do, even untrained arrows could kill. Let the boats go in a file through the bend," added another young commander, diving into the conversation.

The sailor who had come from the vanguard asserted,

his anger hardly veiled, "If the boats go one behind the other, the boatmen will die one after another. We have oars in both our hands, Your Royal Highness! We are unarmed. Give us swords. We will go to the forest ourselves and kill these bowmen and return. Dying unarmed and helpless is not acceptable to us."

"Who will ferry the boats if all the sailors go to the forests, carrying arms" the commander said, coming back at the sailor.

"Whether we the boatmen die singly or in groups, it is all the same. The problem remains the same."

"We are going to war. We still think that the warfield is still further ahead, over sixty *krosus* away, Your Highness! But now the war itself has come right over to Kashi. Pillagers have besieged the palace. They have taken possession of the treasurer. It is proper for us to go where the war is going on."

"Do you mean we should go back to Kashi?"

"Yes, that seems to us the correct thing to do. Having said that, it is up to Your Highness."

That was precisely what the king wanted. "Let the boats turn back to go to Kashi," came the order.

The boats turned back and started sailing toward Kashi at great speed. Since it was downstream, their speed doubled.

From a distance Tarkshya saw the vessels turn back. He took five bowmen of his choice, mounted his horse and skirting round the woods, came and stood near the confluence of the Ganga and the Gandaki. "Since it is downstream, the boats will sail singly or in groups of two," he ordered. "Don't look at the other boats. As soon as I give the signal all of you take aim at the king's boat and shoot two arrows each."

The boats, which had already been scattered, were further separated from each other at the Ganga-Gandaki confluence because of the force of the crossstream. Getting down from the horse, Tarkshya signalled to the muster of bowmen with his hand. All of them came out of the forest. They didn't look at any other boat. Training the arrows at the king, they unleashed them all at the same time. Another hand signal and another set of five arrows zipped toward the king.

With four arrows piercing his body, the king fell over. The bowmen got on their horses and raced back to the bend in the river. The only damage that Tarkshya's men sustained was that the arrow that the young commander set loose had pierced a bowman's shoulder.

Tarkshya didn't say, "Well done!" He coolly ground in water the herbs that he had brought to treat the injured, prised out the arrow slowly and gingerly before treating the wound. He made his injured bowman lie under a tree thereabouts before racing toward Kashi, his two hundred men in tow.

A general hue and cry erupted in Kashi. The five queens of the Kashi king, the treasurer, the prison security guards had gone into the custody of Kalia's army. They had looted the state treasury. Releasing the prisoners, they had armed them. Thus the contingent of three hundred had augmented to four hundred. Recognising Tarkshya, the Naga army introduced him to Kalia. "Whatever be our internal differences, let us now unite and take possession of the kingdom of Kashi," submitted Tarkshya. "I have two hundred men. They will fight shoulder to shoulder with your four hundred men. The Kashi king might have died. Four arrows have hit him."

"An army came just now, didn't it?"

"They are soldiers who set out on a military expedition. They went only half way before returning. There seems to be no leader surviving among them."

* * * *

Ordering the young commander to take away the king's dead body, the senior commander set out toward the palace with six hundred soldiers. The moment he saw them, Tarkshya told Kalia, "You ask your bowmen to stand on the palace bastion. Ask them to stand with each one's arrow trained on the chest of an enemy soldier. I will wait with my two hundred men under the cover of the neighbouring houses."

Kalia climbed on to the palace bastion and stood there along with his three hundred soldiers. Tarkshya's bowmen hid in wait in the adjacent houses.

There was not a trace of any human soul on the royal path leading to the palace. Seeing that no one was around, Vinayasimha the senior commander ordered: "Attack the palace! Search for the queen!"

Noticing that the soldiers had come within arrowshot, Tarkshya shouted from the top of a house: "There are soldiers on the bastion. Each one has his arrow trained on each one of your soldiers. Fling your arms in front of this house."

Half of the soldiers chucked away their firearms. The rest let out hoarse cries as they strode toward Tarkshya. Arrows from the bastion came flying and skewered the chests of hundreds of soldiers. The senior commander took refuge in the opposite house along with some soldiers who were close at hand and carried on with the battle. Tarkshya had already disappeared from the balcony. A war of arrows began from that house.

Kalia's fighters had driven Vinayasimha's soldiers out to a distance of about twenty *marus* from the palace. That much of space was empty of people.

Asking his men to get on with the battle of arrows, Tarkshya sneaked over to the other side of the royal path leading to the palace under the cover of the gallery that was there opposite the palace with a dagger and with five soldiers in tow. He squeezed through the light-letting cleft of the backyard into the house in which Vinayasimha was holed up. Vinayasimha was busy unleashing arrows into the house in which Tarkshya was supposed to be hiding. He didn't see Tarkshya who had come from behind. Tarkshya beheaded Vinayasimha in the blink of an eye.

It is quite possible that Vinayasimha thought the man who had entered was his own man. When Tarkshya's sword hacked the old commander's neck, the other soldiers heard his cries. Not bearing to see the gruesome scene, all of them laid down their arms. Tarkshya climbed onto the roof and hung the head on the roof. His men came behind him and arrested the enemy soldiers. Some took to their heels.

In the meantime Durjayaṣimha the junior commander walked over through a shortcut towards the palace along with two hundred troops. Before doing that he laid the dead king's body on a cot of coir ropes and, covering it with a white shroud, left behind two soldiers to stand guard. Durjayasimha had come through the part which was bereft of people and which was within Kalia's field of vision. Durjayasimha was a dolt, but was nonetheless a brave man. He was a skilled bowman. Seeing the palace gate open, he rushed into the palace compound. His foot soldiers followed him. After all of them went in, Tarkshya lugged the gate closed before securing the outer bolt. The entrance

door of the palace had been bolted from inside. Two hundred soldiers were thus trapped in the palace compound. On the palace bastion stood Kalia's soldiers training their arrows on the trapped enemy below. The moment Kalia signalled, a Naga who knew the Kashi language cried forth: " You people are caught in the palace square. Our arrows are looking straight at you. Let us not have bloodshed. Put down your arms." But Durjayasimha who was fearlessly adventurous had different ideas. He let fly an arrow, which went straight into that interpreter's chest. The bilingual soldier fell over. The very next moment an arrow form Kalia's bow pierced Durjayasimha's stomach. As soon as the commander fell, the soldiers flung down their arms. Kashi became a part of Ayodhye.

The news spread like lightning and reached Ayodhye. Word that the Shravasti army had surrendered in Nandi village also reached the capital.

Purukutsani got wise to Sage Vamadeva's message. "There may be yet more incursions from the east. This victory alone is not enough," she told herself.

"The *ottappa* queen has yet again pierced the bunch of stones," crackled Bhima Bhatta, addressing the scamps of his hangout.

* * * *

Trasadasyu was still a two-year-old boy. Vrisha was seven years old. Vrisha used to come to the palace everyday to play with the royal child. He used to put Trasadasyu on his shoulder and go about in the garden.

Her Excellency didn't want to expand her kingdom. She crowned the king's elder son the king of Kashi. There were no suitable successors in Shravasti. The reins of

administration were handed over to a premier there. He was to come over to Ayodhye once every three months to report.

Shravasti could have been handed over to the Bhilla king, Upendrasimha. But since the Bhilla still harboured intense hate for the Shravasti citizens, the queen hadn't done it, saying to herself: 'Not now'

She kept both Kalia and Tarkshya with herself for the ensuing war. She vouchsafed them the posts of feudatories.

9

The following year Her Majesty teamed up her eighth premier Vikramasimha and Simha Bhatta and sent them off to Rukamangada for a compromise. In their wake went Tarkshya dressed as a tourist along with Kalia and four of his companions. The queen had told Tarkshya: "I have sent Kalia so he could see first hand your spying skills. You work in such a way as to facilitate his learning." Kalia was tricked out as a tourist's servant.

Rukmangada, who had ascended the throne after Bhadrayu's death, was admittedly a religious man. The news that Ayodhye had vanquished both Kashi and Shravasti at the same time was a bitter one for him. He was under the wrong impression that Ayodhye had raided both Kashi and Shravasti on its own and swallowed both. Just then Rukmangada was engaged to be married. His bride was King Panchala's elder daughter. Queen Keshini hoped that through this liaison her younger brother would become the king of Ahichchatra and the prince of Panchala, and would go on to found the Kurupanchala empire. So she took the initiative herself to make the liaison come through.

The young twenty-year-old king, on whose upper lip a moustache had started sprouting, heard the news which was announced: "Two royal representatives have come with some news of Ayodhye." He stalked out, his tread heavy and hateful. He didn't want the visitors to even sit. "What is it?" he asked, his voice curt and business-like.

Seeing this behaviour of the king's, Vikramasimha signalled to Simha Bhatta. Simha Bhatta had to intone the *mantra* of benediction that one utters when one sees someone. He threw the *akshate* grains that he had in his hand on the king, enunciated the *mantras* in a steady, continuous voice before uttering the benediction. He then uttered in Sanskrit the salutations that the queen of Ayodhye had sent Rukmangada.

Rukmangada was proficient in Sanskrit. "Whatever be the people of Ayodhye, it is gratifying to note that even among them there are people who know Sanskrit. We have a scholarly meeting this evening. The human gods should come," Rukmangada said before joining his palms at his chest in salutation.

Then Vikramasimha spoke: "Your Excellency! People who don't like us are spreading the canard that it was we who made attempts to occupy Kashi and Shravasti. But the reality is different!"

"The premier should let us in on whatever he knows!"

"The news of your marriage hasn't reached Ayodhye, Your Majesty! If it had, our queen would have sent the senior premier and the army chief with even better gifts to wish you with. Our request to you is that Your Majesty should understand the purpose behind the small gift sent now and to savour it" Vikramasimha then submitted the wooden container of golden epaulets that the queen had sent to the king.

"What does your queen want from us?"

"Just your friendship, nothing else."

"Your queen sends her premier, and the army chief follows. Is it true?"

"No, it isn't. Only we two have come. It was the Kashi king who crowned the Yadava king in Shravasti. To repay this debt of help, the Shravasti king attacked Ayodhye from the south while the Kashi king raided it from the east. It was because of our guru's blessings that we won, and not because of our bravery."

"Who is your guru?"

"Sage Vamadeva. But our family priest is of Vasishta lineage. We have had running from both sides a tradition of goodness, purity and righteousness."

"We also hold both Vasishta and Vamadeva in great esteem. We have also heard about the deleterious effects of your victory. Only yesterday there was some news from the Gaya kingdom."

"I have spent the last fortnight travelling, Your Majesty! So I don't know about the news from Gaya."

"That your queen made the eldest son ascend the throne after the Kashi king's death may be attributed to your queen's generosity. But your soldiers emptied the treasury, it seems. Five of the Kashi king's men perished in Dharathirtha. On hearing all this Shakyanripati attacked and occupied Gaya. The kingdom of Kashi is now split down the middle. There is always victory and defeat in wars. Problems arise if the state splits."

"I now understand Your Majesty's exasperation. I give you my word that the queen of Ayodhye has nothing to do with this, she has had no hand in this."

"Your queen lags behind no one in manoeuvring things. I will remember your promise. But I believe only news that comes from witnesses. I have heard that your queen is peerless in conducting the affairs of the state."

"Yes, Her Excellency has so far piloted the ship of the state in this state of kingless chaos with great skill and without bloodletting. Like you she is god-fearing too. Her intentions are clean. What is the point in blaming the navigators when the big ship they are steering hits small fish?"

"Ahichchatra is as big a fish as Ayodhye."

"Ahichchatra is even bigger. It harboured the ambition of expanding and becoming the empire of Aryavarta."

"That was at the time of my mother's stepson. The disaster that that Shortie brought about is the cause of this unstable situation."

Then Vikramasimha went down on his knees before lying on his stomach and bringing his palms together in front of him in salutation. "That you think that way," he said, "proclaims your pure, righteous character. Her Excellency has sent you a request."

"What is it?"

"It is now about twenty years since our king His Excellency Purukutsa has been incarcerated in your kingdom. If you take pity and send him back to Ayodhye, our queen has said it is as if "you have made a gift of life and a gift of the fortunate state of having a living husband." She will remember till her dying day this help of yours. She will keep a flame forever glowing in your name in the Vasanthikadevi temple."

Rukmangada's face grew serious. With an evil thought striking, a smile played on his face. He held back the

answer that had come right up to his lips. "The queen has given birth to a male progeny without the king, why would they need the king now?" he wanted to say. He however fell silent thinking that since he had a reputation of being a good, pure-of-heart man, a *satvika*, insulting a queen was not proper."

"Bhadrayu the shortie thought of clearing his path by marrying your queen," he said. "I gather your king said he would do the 'presenting-the-girl-in-marriage' ritual himself. Why didn't the queen agree?"

"She had expressed her honest opinion, hadn't she? She had right then said, "Those who don't win should not demand such absurd things from the winners." She had also said one could talk further only if the king agreed."

"She might have sent similar word even now, mightn't she?"

"No, she hasn't. She has now sent an humble request."

"In case I reject the request, is there an idea of an incursion?"

"Your Royal Majesty! A reply to this question is outside my brief. She has requested you with folded hands. Her Excellency the queen of Ayodhye has sent an humble request." Vikramasimha repeatedly stressed the 'humble request' part.

"Bhadrayu has imprisoned twenty kings. The marriage is to take place in a week. The Lakulisha Pashupata pontiff has ordered the release of ten kings and a hundred commoners. I will that day pick up ten tile pieces from a vessel containing milk in front of His Worship Nageshaswami. If in any of them there is the king's instruction, the king will be taken in a chariot with all state honours up to the border. He can then travel to wherever he likes."

Vikramasimha jumped from where he was seated as if from a released coiled spring and held Rukmangada's legs. Simha Bhatta gave his blessings by intoning the Vedic *mantras* in a high-pitched voice.

"There is no reason to feel happy so early, Your Excellency! Pray to His Worship Nageshaswami."

"I have something more to say, My Lord! Has an invitation gone to Ayodhye?"

"No! The neighbouring kings don't like the idea of Ahichchatra and Panchala kingdoms joining to become the Kurupanchala empire. If invitations are sent to distant kingdoms, the problem will aggravate. Considering everything I have sent out an invitation to the Hastinapura emperor. His Imperial Majesty the emperor of Hastinapura is our emperor. He will not interfere in our affairs. Even when our kingdom perished and then revived, they didn't so much as look this side. I don't know whether he is strong or not. But every king recognises his emperorship. Although the Shortie won over so many kingdoms even he didn't attack Hastinapura, which was right behind him. As a practice that is not normally allowed but is allowed in exceptional circumstances, the Hastinapura king sorted out for you our squabbles. Recognising this, an invitation has gone to Hastinapura. Back in Ayodhye, you might have told the queen about the pardon I sought for not extending an invitation."

"I was thinking about something else, Your Excellency! I am the eighth premier. Even in age, knowledge and experience I am the eighth one. My only high point is that I know Sanskrit well. That I didn't come with a gift befitting our queen is what frets me. A gift of five thousand golden *varahas* by the queen is the procedure

on such an important occasion. I will arrange that too. But my request to you is that you shouldn't think otherwise if I present you something on Ayodhye's behalf."

"All right. You may go after you see His Worship Nageshaswami's selection."

Then Simha Bhatta asked, " Can we see our king before that, Your Serene Majesty!"

"You can. But you may not like it."

"Why wouldn't I like it?"

"You could see him from a distance at the meeting this evening."

Before the meeting got underway that evening, Rukmangada raised his eyebrows, looking at the gallery in the balcony signalling to Vikramasimha and Simha Bhatta to look there. Entering through the door there, a handcuffed King Purukutsa was coming, placing his hand on the gallery railing. Mriganayane was with him. She would facilitate his movement supporting him with her hand in the crook of his arm. The king would lose balance. He was trembling. His face was darkened.

"I said all kings could come in handcuffs. Previously six to eight kings used to come. But now only he is coming!" said Rukmangada, his voice a trifle high.

"Has he been coming for the last twenty years?"

"This scholarly assembly started after I became the king. Bhadrayu spent his time annexing kingdoms," said Rukmangada.

Simha Bhatta's eyes moistened the moment he saw the king. The invocation of blessings and well-being should have been done right at the start. Simha Bhatta requested Rukmangada to let him do it in the end. He was apprehensive that his voice might choke and tremble.

There were of course scholars in the meeting. But erudition, learning, show and pomp, style and enunciation, only these were to the fore. In the end Simha Bhatta enunciated some *mantras* from Samaveda before ending with an auspicious prayer. From the balcony Mriganayane began to look curiously at Simha Bhatta as if she had recognized him.

"Do you know Mriganayane?" asked Vinayasimha of Simha Bhatta as they returned to their place of residence. "She was looking at you over and over again from the balcony, wasn't she?"

"I more than know her," beamed Simha Bhatta. "When I was ten or twelve years old, I used to go to their house. She was then a child of three years. Her mother Lalitambe used to give me a priestly present of an anna daily."

"Why did you smile? Did you remember something?"

"Lalitambe is a very honourable woman. You know what happened one day. I must have been twelve years old then. She didn't have any money on her to offer me as the priestly present. There was loads of grain at home. She measured a quarter of a seer before saying, "I don't have money today to give you as the priestly present. Take this free food." I finished my *pooje*. I was on the point of going when she took me by the hand and led me into her room. "You make love to me and take that as your present," she offered. Not able to do as she said, I ran away from there. I told this to my friend, Bhima Bhatta when I ran into him in the evening. "You fool! Being a Rigvedi man, you let go of Lalitambe? Had I been in your place, I would have done it to her before saying to her, "Your present has reached me." We started to make fun of him that day by calling him, 'ghanapathi'. The nickname has come to stay."

"You didn't go for the *pooje* the following day?"

"I did. She gave me a present of four annas. She popped the joints on her hand. She is a highly respectable woman."

"If you look at the way Mriganayane is walking the king, putting her hand in his armpit, don't you think the mother's qualities have descended to the daughter?"

"Yes, she is full of the mother's qualities. The way he is tottering as he walks, one thinks he has leprosy. My eyes welled with tears. She is a great woman. You imagine what kind of patience one who has to tend to a leper has to have."

'It seems you don't like the king coming back to Ayodhye."

"Whatever be my wish, I pray that he is cured of his leprosy."

"Isn't Bhima Bhatta really a *ghanapathi*?'

"He is a supreme rake, a *ghana-poli*! For the greed of the money of the priestly present, he administered the *gayatri mantra* to a five year old, didn't he? "

"Isn't he your friend?"

"Yes, he is. He did it for the palace meal and the present. He is now angry with me because my wife got a present from the queen."

The following five days were spent in collecting five thousand *varahas* for the gift to be given to Rukmangada on behalf of Ayodhye. Vikramasimha had six hundred *varahas*. Simha Bhatta threw up his hands in helplessness. The twosome roamed about the streets in the hope that they would meet somebody from Ayodhye. Nobody was to be seen. In front of a shop hung a board on which was written in big letters: "Shriyala Shetty: Ayodhye diamond

merchant" They walked in and said: "We are from Ayodhye. We have come without knowing about the king's marriage here. Our queen usually makes an expensive present, of about five thousand *varahas*, on such occasions. We don't know anybody here. Can we get a good gift on loan? We will give you its cost in fifteen days. You should safeguard our honour." There was the flavour of imperious airs in Vikramasimha's voice.

"We used to buy goods in Ayodhye and sell them here. That has stopped for the last ten years."

"Why did it stop?

"King Sagara's men made our travel difficult. We buy our merchandise from this place. Thinking these are Ayodhye goods, gullible fools buy them. Nevertheless the transaction hasn't yet stopped."

The merchant took up another board from inside and held it up to them: "No credit taken or given."

"Bhatta! Mriganayane seems to have recognised you. Let us go to the prison."

They both went to the prison. "We have come from Ayodhye." They told the prison guard, "We have to see His Excellency King Purukutsa."

"Who are you?" came a brusque voice from the prison bastion, which was as secure as a fortress.

"We are the premiers of Ayodhye. We came yesterday itself. We saw the king. King Rukmangada told us to stay back for another five or six days and attend his wedding before returning."

"The town is full of premiers now. Do you have anything we can identify you by as the king's men?"

"I know King Purukutsa. I have done *pooje* in

Mriganayane's house," submitted Simha Bhatta

A clanger had been dropped. A solemn voice sounded: "If you have a button of Mriganayane's blouse, show it to him. He will let you in."

The twosome returned, affronted. "Bhatta! You shouldn't henceforth talk to guardsmen. If I had talked, I would have thought up something. All right! We will go for the last stratagem. We should search for those five men."

They knocked about the streets yet again. They looked intently at every face. They didn't know in which disguise Tarkshya's companions would have come. They were subjected a couple of times to comments like, " What are you looking at?" "Is something dancing on our faces?"

The man they found first was Veerasena. Vikramasimha tried to take him aside, on to the roadside. "Sir, I stepped on your foot. Please excuse me," said Veerasena. "We should meet as if by accident. Otherwise our purpose is not achieved," returned the pedestrian. "Be careful! There are people who have seen you in yesterday's meeting."

Vikramasimha laid out his problem. "I have two hundred *varahas*," said the man. "Take it. Don't look for me in the street." He went off feigning a wrench in his foot.

Kalia, who stood chatting in front of the flower shops in the evening, saw these people. When the chatter reached a stage, he walked toward them whistling. They exchanged words without looking at one another's faces.

"We need five thousand *varahas* to present the king with a wedding gift. How much do you have?"

"I have three hundred *varahas*. But I need it for my work."

"Where is Tarkshya?"

"I will take you to him. You follow me from a distance."

Since they stood there in a suspicious manner, the watchman roared, "Who are you? Why are you standing here?"

Without a word in return, Kalia took up the flower packet that the florist had parcelled up for him, and disappeared through an exit of the market place. Without looking at him, Vikramasimha and Simha Bhatta followed him exiting by another road. The three met in the garden on the other side. Walking quietly they entered the gardener's hut.

A man, who was sleeping there with his face covered, sat up suddenly, hearing the sound of the approaching footsteps. Who was it but Tarkshya!

"Don't look at them again and again, Kalia! That may gum up the works."

"They need money: five thousand *varahas*."

"This is for the premier. This is the ring that has the secret sign of Her Excellency. Show it to Shreeyala Shetty, the man you saw in the morning. You will get the loan you want. Now you leave!" So saying Tarkshya handed over the ring that was around his neck.

"We saw the king from a distance."

"We saw him from near. We talked to him. He didn't agree to return to Ayodhye."

"He is healthy, isn't he?"

"He is! Has the big disease, leprosy. Two fingers are gone."

"They will release ten kings at the time of the marriage."

"Yes, I know. That has been arranged. A playing token with his name will come. But it is doubtful if he will choose to come back! You proceed now."

Quietly the two men left. They went toward the glittering lamps of the market place before walking to their residence.

Early in the morning the following day they came to Shreeyala Shetty's shop.

As soon as he saw them, the very man who had shown them the board put his finger on his lips enjoining silence. There were a couple of customers. After they left, he spoke up. "I will give you monkey caps. Wear them so your faces are not seen. Shreeyala Shetty is sitting on the balcony. Workers are there below. They should not see your faces," said the man before walking to the back entrance door with the monkey caps. There he gave them the caps, saying, "Wear it here." Their faces couldn't be seen. They could however see what was in front through the hole in it.

As the man opened the door, they followed him in. There were twenty goldsmiths working there. Going past them, they went up to the balcony. After crossing three doors, they came and stood in front of the safe beside which sat Shreeyala Shetty. A man abruptly grabbed their monkey caps before pointing to the seats placed in front of Shreeyala Shetty.

"We have no time now to make your queen suitable jewellery. All of our workers are very busy. For now we can make a golden plate like this, Look!" submitted Shreeyala Shetty.

He opened the strongbox, and taking out a heavy five-vesseled golden unit, placed it before them. It was a lotus-shaped worship vessel. "Will this do?" he asked.

The twosome eyed the vessel quietly. There were five golden lotuses. A stalk-shaped handle. On one side was a bud in bloom. The workmanship was superb. But it was a plate of welded silver.

Noticing their silence, the merchant opened another chamber of the safe, took out a golden wrist-ornament, which had intricate sculpture. This had five precious stones that shone brilliantly. Around it was a carving of big pearls. The whole thing was mango-shaped, and impressively attractive.

"We can't give it today itself. This has been made for the His Excellency's elder sister. Queen Keshini Devi has ordered something comparable to this to be made in Mithila. If she likes our work she will buy this. If she likes that, she will buy that. This costs five thousand and five hundred *varahas*. But you will have to wait for two more days. It is up to Keshinidevi. Is this all right with you?"

Edging close to Vikramasimha, Simha Bhatta whispered into his ears, "The workman who forged this seems to be an Ayodhye goldsmith."

"How do you say that?"

"The mango shape says it all."

Their whispered words fell on the merchant's ears. But he didn't let it show. It was only when they asked that he said "Yes, the one who made this trained in goldsmithy in Ayodhye. He hails from Mithila. He works with us. It is because of him that we advertise as 'Ayodhye's diamonds'"

"But the cost is five hundred *varahas* more," said Bhatta.

"I have six hundred *varahas* with me, don't I?"

"If Her Excellency comes to know that you used the

money for this, she will get angry. Don't be haughty!"

"Shall I ask Tarkshya?"

"Didn't he ask us not to see him again?"

Their whispered dialogue ended there. Shreeyala Shetty hit the cushion that he was sitting on in great anger before rapping them: " Sirs, You people seem crazed. It is my stupidity that I am transacting business with you. Big kings and emperors tremble with dread when they hear Tarkshya's name. You people utter his name so lightly before a merchant like me. Listen! Early this morning your friend with that name came here. He has seen this wrist-ornament and liked it. He valued it at five thousand *varahas*. I have agreed. I didn't let it on precisely to test your intelligence. Queen Keshinidevi has already agreed to the ornament fashioned in Mithila. This would be yours. You shouldn't talk loosely. You shouldn't utter that name. If you have anything that could be identified as the queen's, let me have it. Or else, I will tell the guards that you people have broken in to thieve, and despatch you to the prison. Be careful!"

The faces of the two Ayodhyeyins assumed an expression assumed by someone who has come upon a stone in the meal he is eating.

Without a word Vikamasimha took out the ring from his pocket and gave it to Shreeyala Shetty. Shreeyala Shetty threw it into his heap of diamonds without taking a critical look at it.

"Our leader will come to the wedding hall along with two security guards. He will stand by the third pillar. He will hand over the ornament to you right there. Wherever you are, you learn to talk a little more carefully. Sending people like you on this task was indiscreet of Her Majesty.

It should not happen that your friend is sent to jail and he is forced to think of you as the cause of the disaster. Hold tight you tongue. If I give you the ornament the whole box will vanish. You are dolts. I don't want to see you again. The ring with the queen's signet will reach your friend before this evening. This is the punishment for people who roam the market place with a ring in their pockets. You may now leave. Don't ever come to our shop again."

"How do we identify your leader?"

"Finding you and handing you the ornament is his job. But you remember the third pillar."

Mystified, the twosome got up. "Please pardon us!" Simha Bhatta jabbered.

"I will have to report to him the fact that you people took his name before me."

"All right," said Vikramasimha with an air of finality. Putting on their monkey caps, they got downstairs. As soon as they crossed the back entrance door, a man standing outside wrenched their face-wear. The twosome walked out with downcast faces.

10

Embittered as they were by the negative experience at Shetty's shop, Vikramasimha and Simha Bhatta didn't talk for the next three days. In the small hours on the fourth day two well-dressed royal servants woke them up. They shaved them, poured out hot water for their bath. After the bath they rubbed their hair with scented oil and gave it a massage. They combed Vikramasimha's hair. They smoothed and did Simha Bhatta's long hair tuft into a knot

before wrapping round it a chain of jasmine flowers a la Narada, the *puranic* character. Then they were dressed up. They were brought with full honours to Nageshaswami's temple at about two 'o clock. On a high seat in front of Nageshaswami reposed the emperor of Hastinapura, along with his retinue, the premier and the army chief. Queen Keshinidevi the widow, who was dressed up in white and sported a basil chain around her neck, was seated near the sanctum sanctorum, muttering prayers, names of deities and so on. As the two took their seats, the others went and sat behind them. The five men from Ayodhye were not among them. King Rukmangada arrived exactly at the appointed auspicious hour, performed a *pooje* for Nageshaswami before throwing the last offering into the sacrificial fire. Then he began to take out the playing-tokens from the golden jar that had been placed in front. The third token was King Purukutsa's. "Great!" exclaimed the two Ayodhye visitors. After Rukmangada took out ten tokens, he entrusted the task to the prison officer, and paying his respects to the emperor of Hastinapura, walked over, and sat beside him.

First of all Angaraja was released. Rukmangada garlanded him. Thereafter the king of the Madra kingdom was released upon which a garland fell around his neck too.

People had to wait for a while for the third prisoner who was none other than King Purukutsa. He might have taken some time because he was hobbling. King Purukutsa was dressed in a white silk shirt and a white *dhotra*. He sported a Gurjar cap on his head. He walked leaning on his walking stick. There was Mriganayane who helped the prisoner-king on, shoring him with her hand in his armpit. The moment Vikramasimha and Simha Bhatta saw them,

they stood up. "May victory be King Purukutsa's!" exuded Vikramasimha. Simha Bhatta started an invocation of blessings and well being in a continuous and steady voice before saying a 'vah' and ending up weeping. He somehow managed to finish the well-wishing invocation amidst sobs that day. The assemblage grew grim.

One doesn't know whether it was premeditated or Rukmangada was inspired by Simha Bhatta's behaviour, King Rukmangada got up, headed over up to the door, shored King Purukutsa holding him by the other arm, and walking the king slowly and steadily, had the emperor of Hastinapura garland him.

"Oh, My Lord! I am freed today from the sin that Sagara committed. The taint of incarcerating you unjustly for eighteen years is erased with the holy mercy of Nageshaswami", submitted Rukmangada.

Purukutsa nodded in response, the nod bereft of any feeling.

"Your retinue has come to take you to Ayodhye."

Both Vikramasimha and Simha Bhatta stepped up before lying prostrate before King Purukutsa.

Vikramasimha looked at the king's feet. On one of the feet there was only the big toe. There were three toes left in the other foot.

Vikramasimha stood up, and putting his hands together against his chest, said, "Your Excellency! We have come to take you to Ayodhye."

"I do not belong to Ayodhye. Nor am a I king."

"Queen Purukutsani is looking forward to welcoming you!" said Simha Bhatta.

"Who is she?"

Both of them were unnerved.

"She is my wife. I have no other wife!", averred King Purukutsa pointing to Mriganayane.

"Your home is in Ayodhye," Rukmangada broke in.

"Prison is my home. I am fine there because of your kindness. Except the greenery of plants and trees, I have got everything there:air, light and stuff. I will return there," sobbed King Purukutsa.

"His Excellency's stay has been arranged in Santosh Mahal" said the premier, standing up.

"My prison is wherever I am. This body is a prison in itself."

"Your Majesty! Don't make Ayodhye an orphan!" supplicated Simha Bhatta.

"God has made a different arrangement for Ayodhye."

"We are your subjects. We will be punished if we see the queen without taking you."

"I am not a king. I have no subjects. Let's not talk about it."

The Hastinapura emperor paid his respects to King Purukutsa by making a bow: "Your Excellency should come to Hastinapura."

"Yes, I will. On my way to Kedarnath, I will stop by at Hastinapura for two days."

"Mriganayane! Woudn't you like to come to Ayodhye?"

"I am His Excellency's servant. I would be wherever he is. Tell him."

"Your Excellency!" said Rukmangada with an air of finality. "This throne which was tainted with the sin of keeping you in prison for as long as eighteen years is now

freed of it. We have arranged for your stay in Santosh Mahal. Please be kind enough to oblige us."

"All right! I will stay wherever Your Majesty keeps me. Along with my woman."

King Purukutsa left without salutations to any one.

King Purukutsa didn't come at the time of *akshate* that day. The king and Mriganayane were taken to Santosh Mahal in a chariot. The withered old woman-cook was the only one there. All the other servants had gone off to Rukmangada's wedding.

* * * *

The two men of the royal staff who had come to tend to Vikramasimha and Simha Bhatta took them to the wedding hall with all honours. The moment they reached the third pillar, one of them piped: "There would be a meal after the *akshate*. After your meal you bid farewell to His Excellency. Then come straight to your place of residence. There would be a chariot waiting. Either he or I would be there. We will have kept your things in the chariot. The chariot will proceed toward the border. You will get further guidance at the Mira village. You have to stay there in a choultry."

"Has King Rukmangada ordered that we leave today itself."

"You should seek orders yourselves. This is the suggestion from your own people."

Saying this, the two royal servants disappeared into the crowd. Another man stopped them before saying, "This is a gift from Ayodhye," and handing him a bag.

When they went back to their residence, they opened a small box that was there in the bag. In a secure silk chamber lay the diamond wrist-ornament that their queen had to give.

They saw King Rukmangada after they had had their meal. "We should return to Ayodhye today itself. May your marriage bring you great prosperity and a world of good! May the Kurupanchala Empire be victorious! May the friendship between Ayodhye and Kurupanchala live forever!"

"You could have stayed for one more week."

"We came with the intention of staying for three days. It is already one week since we came. The rainy season is nearing. Your Royal Majesty should permit us to leave."

"All right. Inform the queen that we begged Her Excellency's pardon for not sending an invitation to Ayodhye. My need to seek her pardon is even greater now."

"We will tell the queen. May we go now?"

* * * *

The other travellers joined them at around 3 o'clock in the morning when they were sleeping in the Mira village. Leaving Mira, they crossed the border before getting into a forest. There were horses waiting in the forest. They then set off toward Ayodhye.

"There is a path through a tunnel from the prison up to the hut I was sleeping in. Remember!" said Tarkshya breaking the silence on the way. This was addressed to Kalia, but the others heard it as well.

* * * *

Some miscreants broke into Santhosh Mahal on the night of Rukmangada's wedding and stabbed Purukutsa and Mriganayane to death. They broke open the king's box before decamping with just the valuables.

The town in fact thought it was the handiwork of thieves.

The news of the death reached Ayodhye after fifteen days. "Today is the *ottappa* day for our queen," Tarkshya

told the horseman who had brought the news. "She is leaving for Amaru tomorrow. She will stay there for three days and meet the guru. Stay here comfortably for a few days."

"I have no orders to stay here for that many days. Our His Excellency has asked me to come back immediately after conveying this letter."

"If there is any bad news in the letter, our queen may punish you. I will add this to a clutch of other letters and send them to Her Majesty in Amaru after two days. Is that all right?"

Frightened, the messenger handed over the letter before quickly mounting his horse and setting off.

Tarkshya chucked the letter into the fire without reading it.

Rukmangada's grief burnt like a faggot in a tempest.

'The funereal rites were done with all royal honours', the letter said. What else would a letter bearing the news of a royal death contain?!

People who had gone to Ahichchatra spread just the news of Rukmangada's marriage in Ayodhye. Only Tarkshya knew the rest of the news.

Within a week five thousand *varahas* were in Shreeyala Shetty's hands.

Neither Vikramasimha nor Simha Bhatta let on the fact that His Excellency King Purukutsa didn't agree to come back to Ayodhye. There had arisen in them feelings of fear and respect about Tarkshya. Tarkshya had said that spreading this would dent the prestige of Ayodhye. Just this was enough to seal their mouths. They told Tarkshya about the insult they were subjected to in Shreeyala Shetty's

shop. "Yes. I came to know about it. That is no big thing, don't worry. It is enough if there is no such indiscretion done in Ayodhye."

11

Tarkshya had thought: 'The news of His Excellency's death in Ahichchatra is bound to reach Ayodhye sooner or later. I should not be there at that time. Doubts may arise in her mind because of the changes in my face. I shouldn't face her eyes then.' For this reason he wanted to take part too in the struggle in Gaye. But the queen entrusted the task of freeing Gaye to Kalia. Tarkshya was hurt. He retreated into inaction as he thought wordlessly to himself: 'Going to Her Excellency now and broaching retirement would not be proper. She might think it is jealousy.'

The king of Nepal was himself a brave man. His soldiers were skilled, experienced in warfare moving about as they had in that hilly terrain. They were expert marksmen. Kalia had for that reason drafted into that army people in and around Amaru. This was indeed intelligent of Kalia. The queen however desired to send a big army. Gaya was a well-spread out city. One needed five thousand soldiers to lay siege to it. One thousand horsemen were needed for the main attack. One hundred groups of ten each would be needed to barricade tens of royal roads leading to the town. Thinking along these lines Her Majesty called Kalia, Tarkshya, Brahmadutta, the premier and two old commanders who were known as Mandhata's strongmen for a confabulation. She ladled out before them her loud thinking.

Brahmadutta expressed his anxiety: "*Mahadevi*! The territorial integrity of the kingdom of Kashi is desirable.

True. But the responsibility for that rests with the Kashi king. Has he sought our help? I have been looking at all papers. I'm afraid I have not seen his request."

"It seems when Vikramasimha was in Ahichchatra, King Rukmangada laid the blame on Ayodhye for dividing Kashi."

"When we go to Gaya, all roads originate in Kashi. This is the main hurdle in our armies entering Gaye without the permission of the Kashi king, Your Excellency!" insisted the premier again.

"Our soldiers need not go marching down roads. They could go through the shortcuts in the woods, can't they, Your Royal ladyship!"

"If a big army goes through the wild paths of a forest, it will scatter," suggested Her Excellency.

"I have no experience in military expeditions. Our townsfolk are formidably good at rowdy raids."

"What does Tarkshya think?" asked Her Excellency.

"I also have my misgivings about a large scale military expedition. Kalia's three hundred men and my two hundred men captured Kashi. It might be difficult to maintain control over a huge army."

"Your Excellency! Shall we send a letter to Kashi?" asked Brahmadutta yet again.

"Saying what?"

"Asking what their opinion about Gaye hiving off is and whether they have done anything about it?"

Her Excellency was a bit frustrated because she hadn't seen in the past such universal disagreement. This was the first closed door discussion meeting. She as a matter of fact felt that she shouldn't henceforth call such meetings. Her

main intention was the punishment to be meted to the Nepal king. It seemed unethical to her to attack and occupy a kingdom because the king was weak. She didn't feel any delight to sit back and see such a sight when it did happen.

"All right. We will see," she said in peroration before she left the meeting.

* * * *

Her Majesty wrote a letter the very next day, not to the Kashi king, but to Trilokasimha, the king of Nepal, which said: I will perform the thread-investing ceremony for my son next year, and come for a visit to the Pashupathinaṭha temple along with His Worship Sage Devadema. On my way back I will go to Gaye on the Bhadrapada new moon day to offer an oblationary meal to the spirits of my father and mother through my son. Please extend to us your hospitality." Since the duo of Vikramasimha and Simha Bhatta worked well in Ahichchatra, she asked them to carry the letter to Ahichchatra.

"Shall I ask you something, Your Excellency? What do I say if the Nepal king asks: 'The Bhadrapada new moon day falls next month. Why doesn't she come right then?" asked Simha Bhatta.

"The ritual of meal offering to the manes in Gaya is an important terminal ritual ceremony for man. Next year Trasadasyu will be eight years old. I will holy thread-invest him then and have him do the meal offering to the manes."

"There is a snag there. It is ordained that the holy thread-investing ceremony for Kshatriyas is done at the age of ten years."

"That I know. I will do it only at the age of ten years. You take this letter to the Nepal king now. I will come for a darshana of God Pashupathinath next year. On my way the

oblation to the manes must be done at Gaye."

* * * *

Trilokasimha, the king of Nepal belonged to the lineage of the priests of the Pashupathinath temple. Although he was basically a Brahmin, he was a king for the last ten generations. He had the warrior's glow on his face. He had a religious nature to boot. Her Excellency had suspected from the beginning that for such a man to covet Gaye, expansion of the kingdom couldn't be the sole aim. The desire to test had strengthened with the difference of a secret consultation. She took a different path this time with the aim of avoiding a public discussion. Has this religious king annexed Gaye crossing seven forests in order to perform with comfort the meal offerings to the manes? But before testing this, she wanted to keep the identity of the tester secret and beyond doubt. She wrote the letter with this goal in mind. In case she wrote to the Kashi king, and if he really desired help, she had to per force become the victim through her own letter. The Kashi king was still a boy. If she said 'I will help', he might jump with joy at the idea. But the onus of all responsibility would lie only on Ayodhye. What that meant was that an open military incursion was one possibility. A secret war was another. Her people didn't support the former. She sent for Tarkshya and Kalia to discuss the second possibility.

"I approve of what you are saying," Her Majesty said. " To mount an open attack is not advisable. There are seven huge forests between Nepal and Gaya. Let Kalia muster one thousand horsemen, snap off communication links between Nepal and Gaya so that Nepal couldn't administer Gaya. I have written to the Nepal king saying: 'I have to visit the Pashupathinath temple and perform the ritual of

offering oblation to the manes in Gaye next year. So please extend your hospitality.' Vinayasimha and Simha Bhatta are proceeding to Nepal today. Kalia has to muster his troops. Tarkshya should in the meanwhile decide on the strategic places in the woods, draw up a map and hand it over to Kalia before returning to Ayodhye in a week's time. The Mahalaya new moon day falls toward the end of this month. The king is certain to come to Gaye for the annual 'meal-offering to the manes' ceremony. If it is possible, we should stop him in his path so as to ensure his late arrival at the ritual ceremony. Even if that is not possible, we should inveigle the Gaye Brahmins, by paying more priestly money, into avoiding his ceremony, or doing a different yaga nearby, or pose difficulties to his ritual by buying up the sesame, milk, curds and other stuff that is available in town the previous day. It is Kalia's responsibility to convince Trilokasimha that the people of Gaye are dissatisfied with Nepal rule. Tarkshya should devise an appropriate plan for this. Would that be all right?"

"It would, Your Excellency!" said Kalia.

"Your Excellency's idea is attractive. But is it all right if I take the responsibility for everything?" submitted Tarkshya. His day of reckoning had come. He was determined that he shouldn't be present in Ayodhye when the news of the king's death broke in Ayodhye.

"It would be convenient if you are in Ayodhye," said Her Excellency.

"Yes" agreed Tarkshya, expedientless.

"Tarkshya is more experienced in this kind of work," suggested Kalia in all politeness. "I can get work done from soldiers. Both for civil work and military operations Tarkshya is the man!"

"Didn't I say it? It would be convenient if Tarkshya is here," suggested the queen.

"See that the people of Nepal should not know who is giving them trouble!" said the queen to Kalia.

"Why not, Your Excellency!?" chimed in Kalia.

* * * *

Trilokasimha welcomed both the royal messengers from Ayodhye. He extolled the queen's evil mindset. He promised them that he would be there both in Gaye and Nepal, standing with folded hands to welcome the queen. He had them stay back for two days.

Within two weeks of their departure came the news that the Nepal couriers were subject to being robbed and killed in the woods of North Kosala. Government places in Gaye were looted. Some miscreants burgled the granaries. There was news also of the roughing up of the royal staff and of the robbing of their horses when they travelled in wooded terrains. Trilokasimha thought at first that this was the handiwork of either the Gaya soldiers or the Kashi soldiers.

When Trilokasimha left for Gaya for the 'meal-offering to the manes' ritual on the Mahalaya new moon day, he left with a big army contingent a full week in advance to tackle the menace of the depredators. This was the first Mahalaya new moon day after Gaya came into his possession. When they were crossing the third forest, they saw that the royal highway had been dug so as to form a big pit. The hooves of horses started getting stuck in the soil of the bank on either side. Then a shower of arrows rained down on them. Although arrows were shot, only a few died, but quite a few people were injured. The king sent off musters of soldiers to catch the robbers while he

himself descended into the low ground. It was easy to go down. The other bank of the pit was quite steep. There was no room for horses to place their feet. On the other bank it was as if a fence had been made, hacking down plants and trees. If the looters had hidden behind the fence, what would have been my lot, said Trilokasimha to himself.

In the meantime a messenger came running to say that the robbers that the army had chased disappeared into the second forest and that it appeared that having mustered there, they had the plan of hemming us in from both sides.

Retreating would be against the royal Nepal law and duty. It wouldn't be an action befitting a king. It would also dent its pride. The way the robbers unleashed their arrows, they didn't look like they were expert bowmen. Only three or four had died. A hundred others were only injured in the shoulder. A clever idea struck the king.

"Tell the commander to give up the chasing," said the Nepal king. "Let his troops come and stand guard on the near bank. The far bank is quite steep. Let them see that there is no attack on us from behind. I will get the less steep part of this bank leveled out by elephants." He then sent four of his servants to scout for such a place.

There were no shovels and spades to do the levelling out. The king asked the *mahouts* to have the elephants drink arrack.

The servants who had gone away to see the shallower parts of the pit came back running. They said it was circular in shape, it was roughly of the same depth, it wasn't very large and that one could get behind and going around, cross the woods.

Then a shout arose from beyond the fence: "You, Nepalis! Go back! Gaye doesn't want you."

"What is it?" the king asked the Brahmins in his group.

They explained the meaning of the shout before adding, "This doesn't sound like the rustic language either of Kashi or Gaye. The pronunciation is of a different kind."

The king reasoned to himself that it could be the language of the hilly regions of the countryside of Gaya. However going back even a step didn't look good to him. Whichever way one went, it was steep. Brave as Trilokasimha was, he decided to go straight ahead.

He had one advantage. That was that arrows couldn't have touched either the elephant-drivers or the soldiers in the steep parts of the pit. If they had to aim and shoot arrows, they had to come down to the lower bank. Then of course Trilokasimha's men could take them on easily.

Trilokasimha decided to pitch camp right there. He had his men stand at strategic places so the robbers didn't attack from behind. He sent the *mahouts* and the servants along with the elephants to tamp and level out particular places. He sent behind them his skilled archers for their protection.

The insects having bit them and made parts itch, the tuskers got weak and helpless. They were intoxicated to boot. As soon as the pachyderms approached the bank of mud, they rushed forward before starting to butt the mud ridge with their temples and tusks. They didn't need the restraining hooks at all. As the itching wore off, the elephant-driver used the hook and made them work for upwards of another hour.

Kalia, who saw this activity from the top of a tree, was amazed at Trilokasimha's cleverness.

Evening fell. If they had been made to work for another hour, the pachyderms from Nepal would have burrowed another inch, making the fence behind the pit

collapse. The king didn't figure out the plan or the purpose of the pillagers. He cried halt to the day's work and asked the cooks to serve meals. The elephants, the horses and the bowmen all rested. They spent the night there. Trilokasimha's wife Ratnadevi was there with him. They had left behind their children in Nepal.

Day had given in to the dominion of night by the time they finished their meal. As was planned in advance, Kalia's men quietly took away the axle-pins of the ten carts that carried food provisions, implements and other things that were not used.

"What a fool I have been!" exclaimed Trilokasimha the following morning, beating his forehead. "I made the elephants slog it out thinking that we had no implements! With the twenty axle-pins and ten spokes, thirty men could have done what the elephants did!" He then turned to his men. "Now these carts won't be of any use. Let the foot soldiers dismantle the plank and logs and do the tamping. Load the goods and chattels on the horses. Be careful! The rafters of the fence above may fall on your heads. After they give way, keep them in a row on the cart. Let the elephants go first. Let four soldiers carry a rafter and use it as a shield to protect themselves as they go along. Let your leaders tell you by a hand-gesture how many there are lying in wait. The rest of the army will follow. Let the fence that they built be our protector!"

The fence came down in half an hour. Out of the soil came, along with leafy creepers, two elephants and the soldiers. Four people carried each rafter, looking both ways. There weren't any enemies.

"What a miracle? What has happened? Yesterday at least two hundred people were shouting, hiding behind this

fence! There's none to be seen today!" exclaimed the king as he joined the infantrymen, his voice overflowing with surprise.

They had spread *neggilu* thorn on this path. Arrows started raining from behind. The contingent that had been detailed to provide cover to the rearguard had to move looking at the back and shooting arrows. Winding their way up the path of thorns, the elephants and soldiers got sick and tired. On the way to the fourth forest was a fence of pillars made from thorn. The army had to proceed hacking the thorn with their swords. The path skirting the mountain was wet through and through. They had rolled down rocks from the lake on top of the mountain. That was why the path was wet. The hooves of horses began to get stuck in the mud and this told on the king's speed. The king took four days to cover a distance that could have been covered in two days. Anyway the king reached Gaya in the afternoon of the Bhadrapada new moon day, which was the right time for the meal-offering ritual.

There weren't any Brahmins on the platform of the annual death ceremony site, the site of offering meals to the manes. "There was a *yaga* in a nearby village. The Brahmins who had gone there haven't returned. We don't know what the trouble is, there. All these pilgrims waited for them. The organizers of that *yaga* bought up all the stock of rice, ghee, oil and sesame in our town. Even the merchants who traded these things have disappeared," said a merchant.

"It is clear that the purpose of these robbers is that I shouldn't do the 'meal-offering to the manes' ritual. All right, I will see how they succeed in their purpose!"

The following was tomtommed in the town: "We need

sesame for His Highness's manes-appeasing ritual. We need ghee. We will give a *gunji* of gold for a gingely grain! And for a vessel of ghee, as much gold as is necessary to fill the vessel will be given."

The beggars' leader, who sat on the river ghat, gave in bits and pieces gingely seeds that had been chucked away after a similar ritual held earlier. Some filled a *mille* with ghee and came and gave it. They got the quantum of gold the king said they would get. In a word there was a collection of a few fistfuls of sesame and a reasonable amount of ghee. The sesame grains were sprinkled with some holy water before being mixed with half a sack of vermilion-mixed *akshate*. "This is the sesame for today's ceremony. We have two of our Brahmins for your father's annual death rite. There is enough of rice. The responsibility of your father's annual rite is mine," said the Nepal king to the travellers. He performed the death solemnity in a collective fashion with about two hundred people. As he rested that evening the king mulled over various things.

"The expansion of my kingdom is not my goal. My ancestors were priests in Pashupathinatha temple. I occupied Gaya in order to do this meal-offering to the manes and for the sin-removing rite that is done here. If the Kashi king can perform this sin-removing ceremony, I should like to give up Gaya!" So said the Nepal king in a letter and sent it to Kashi through a messenger.

Kalia stopped the messengers in their tracks, grabbed the letter from them, read it before saying in great disappointment, " Is this all?" He then said in the vein of the leader of a pack of thieves, "If you have money on you, part with it!"

"Our master paid whatever money we had to whoever gave us sesame and ghee," they replied. " He has given us ten *varahas* for our stay in Kashi. We have to make do with this for our subsistence and the horses' maintenance."

"Your master seems to be a miser. Even then give me four *varahas* for the mistake of catching you. The Kashi king will feed you and your horses in return for the letter you brought."

"We will give two *varahas*. Please take them and leave us."

"It is better to come and thieve with us than to serve such a miser," declared Kalia.

"Our king is not niggardly. He is quite liberal. If you had given him a *mille* of ghee he would have given you a *mille* of gold."

"A *mille* of gold is not enough for thieves from Gaya even to buy pickles. Tell me if he has a cauldron of gold. I will meet him right away."

"Yes, we did. Everything went for the annual death ceremony."

"Such a big annual rite that everything went for it? What kind of a death ceremony did he perform?"

"He performed the annual death ceremony of as many as two hundred people with his own money."

"How? He has said in the letter that theirs is a different procedure."

"Yes, our forefathers wouldn't be happy with vegetarian meals. They would need nonvegetarian food. Brahmins here wouldn't come for such an annual death rite."

"Is there a difference in the *mantras* and other things?"

"The *mantras* are the same. But our ancestors become

dispirited eating the bland food served here. Appearing in our dreams, they tap their tummies. His Worshipful Majesty had two kinds of meals prepared this time: vegetarian food for the travellers and nonvegetarian food for the deceased ancestors. There were two Brahmins with us. One presided over one kind of annual death ceremony for the travellers and another over another kind for His Majesty."

"Did they fleece the Brahmins?"

"A cauldron of gold."

"All right, fine. Let us not pay you. Leave!" He let them go, along with the letter.

After they left, he sent two couriers off to Ayodhye to convey the gist of the letter: "Our sole purpose in occupying Gaya was to perform unobstructed the annual death rites for deceased ancestors. There has to be a choultry built in Gaya affording free accommodation to travellers from Nepal. It has to be under the custody of two priests of the Pashupathinatha temple. They should have the authority to perform the annual death solemnities, reciting mantras according to our custom. The Kashi king should build it out of his own money. The two priests should be paid a yearly salary of two hundred gold coins out of the Kashi king's treasury. If these conditions are agreeable, the city of Gaya will be handed over to the Kashi king."

After they left, he ordered his army, "You people go quietly home. Don't give any trouble to the king as he returns home."

* * * *

A week went by. "Our *ottappa*-playing queen brought down another group of stones!" loudpedalled a blithe

Bhima Bhatta, sitting on the mud-and-stone seat beside the Vasanthika Devi temple.

12

The news spread in Ayodhye: 'Some unknown robbers stabbed to death His Worshipful Majesty King Purukutsa on the very day of Rukmangada's wedding in Ahichchatra, broke open his box and decamped with the jewellery.'

The moment the report arrived from the chief police officer of Ayodhye, Tarkshya took the initiative to take premier Brahmadutta along to see the queen.

Arms entwined in reverence across and against their chests, both stood crestfallen.

"What is it?" asked the queen.

Neither drummed up the courage to speak.

Seeing their glum faces, Her Excellency sent Brahmadutta out. "What is it? Is it bad news?" she asked Tarkshya.

"Some bad news has come sailing in the air as it were. It is not from anybody's mouth, Your Excellency! I ask you again. I am not fit to be your servant. Please permit me to retire."

"What happened? Tell me that first."

"On King Rukmangada's wedding night, some miscreants broke into King Purukutsa's room and he was..."

"He was what?"

"Assassinated." Her Majesty clammed up.

"I was there the whole day in Ahichchatra that day. I left in the evening. If only I had stayed for another two days." A stunned queenly silence followed.

"Shall I send messengers?" asked Tarkshya without looking her way.

"You leave," suggested the queen with a silent gesture of her forefinger.

Tarkshya escaped from a difficult situation. He went out, backwalking, without showing the queen his back. "I should go to Ahichchatra." he said to the premier before mounting his horse.

* * * *

Her Majesty came over to the mango grove and flopped down on the king's bed.

"This is my fortune!" she bemoaned as her eyes moistened with emotion.

She didn't even send for Trasadasyu for ten days lest he saw her weeping bouts, and to avert the results of such an event.

She came to Ayodhye, her face serious and solemn, on the eleventh day and got the obsequial rites done by Trasadasyu. The premier had already got the funereal rites done by Trasadasyu by burning a doll made from *uddu*, a common pulse. Now Trasadasyu poured out the libation to the deceased His Majesty.

The queen conveyed the news to the Nepal king, and saying that since it was a year in which normal activities were suspended because of the untoward happening, her trip to Pashupathinatha temple was deferred, she also assured him that she would get a choultry built in Gaya. She then left for the mango orchard.

* * * *

Before going to Ahichchatra, Tarkshya headed first to Amaru and conveyed the news of the royal death to His Worship. He also requested His Holiness to go to Ayodhye

at his convenience and console the queen.

"Did you come in person to convey this? May God pardon you! May your pure and righteous intentions give you strength!" so wished the renunciate ascetic, fixing him with a long hard look.

"I have to go to Amaru," said Tarkshya, his face long and livid, stopping the dialogue at that point before mounting his horse.

Her Excellency suffered from chest pain for the next six months. His Worship Sage Devadema came over himself and treated her.

The thread-investing ceremony was performed on Trasadasyu when he turned ten years old.

"Could we crown him the king?" asked the queen.

"Let him complete fourteen years. He has the good fortune of becoming the king. You could do it then."

* * * *

The wish of Rukmangada and his elder sister wasn't fulfilled. Their dream was to unite Ahichchatra and Panchala to found the larger Kurupanchala Empire. That this shouldn't happen was the decision of the neighbouring kings. In this war of attrition, the Panchala king died. His grandson Talajangha was crowned the king. Rukmangada who was the prince of Panchala didn't have any such wish. Nor did he feel disappointed that he didn't become the king. He said that it was enough for him if a few people gave their consent. In the next three months the elder queen Charamadevi passed away too.

Talajangha's first enemy was Rukmangada. Talajangha however didn't have to fear anything from Rukmangada. Talajangha's first attack was on Mallaraja, Rukmangada's supporter.

Thus started the second phase of the Dasharajni war.

Trasadasyu who had the thread-investing ceremony done on him when he was ten years old married at the age of fourteen years. Rukmangada's elder daughter became his wife. After the wedding, the coronation took place as well wherein Trasadasyu was crowned the king.

Purukutsani used to spend most of her time in the mango orchard. The premier himself took over the day-to-day work of the state. Her Excellency retired Tarkshya before appointing him as the guru to train Trasadasyu in warfare. Trasadasyu had the war skills of his mother. In the next five-six years he learnt with felicity archery, swordery, charioteering, the logistics and strategic planning of the war field, the construction of forts, underground passages and prisons, the deployment of the army peculiar to terrains like hills, forests and open fields, the expedients to employ when there is an enemy incursion, the achievement of control over the subjects, public works like construction of bunds and canals on rivers, the distribution of salaries and prizes, management of the intelligence, human resource testing etc. He took hold of the reins of the state when he turned eighteen.

An untoward lapse occurred at Trasadasyu's wedding.

Making use of his relationship with him as a childhood friend, Vrisha Bhatta started to tell Trasadasyu things about his father to grind his own axe. He would tell him things like, although his father was a master of the (fifth of) the eight Vedic pathas, and knew all ways of reciting the vedic hymns, Her Excellency gave the main festive royal gifts only to Simha Bhatta, thus treating him as the leader of the Brahmins etc, things he used to talk about earlier. He even convinced him that, instead of Simha Bhatta, had his father gone to Ahichchatra, King Purukutsa would have been

alive now. Trasadasyu, who became the king, appointed Bhima Bhatta as the chief priest for his wedding.

Bhima Bhatta's base and rotten qualities began to be exposed. Trasadasyu was enraged by various events: Simha Bhatta being dubbed *ghanapathi*, the master of the Vedic *pathas* for fun, the multiple mistakes he used to make in uttering *mantras*, he making fun of the other Vaidic Brahmins by according primacy to Rigveda, the discrimination that happened in gifts and priestly presents, the affront to Simha Bhatta and his wife and children, and the rejection and scorn that the Naga Brahmins who came over from Amaru underwent. In fact some events that disgusted Trasadasyu happened right in front of him. He knew what was wrong.

The crack that had appeared in the group of Brahmins could not however be repaired. A big contingent of Brahmins met Trasadasyu and told him that Simha Bhatta was the only right person to be the royal priest since he knew all the four Vedas, and that Bhima Bhatta should not be appointed the royal priest. Bhima Bhatta came to know this. He told his son, "See that the king doesn't call the Bhatta for the priesthood!"

"It seems Brahmins met you to tell you my father shouldn't become the priest," said Vrisha to Trasadasyu, broaching the subject.

"Yes! Even I don't like Bhima Bhatta to become the priest. If you want, you become the priest, but not he!" Trasadasyu told Vrisha.

"All right!" Vrisha returned agreeably. Anyhow there wasn't any room for Bhima Bhatta.

Trasadasyu ruled that Vrisha and his wife should stay in a room right in the palace. This was to keep him off his father's inveigling.

Trasadasyu 1

When Trasadasyu turned nineteen, Queen Purukutsani turned away from active public life to live in the mango grove. The reason lay in the past.

The craze for Simha Bhatta!

The queen stayed for three or four days in the mango garden and two or three days in Ayodhye attending to important work.

One day when Tarkshya was moving on horseback past the Vasanthika Devi temple, he saw a strange scene. There was a clutch of Brahmins crowding round something. In their midst was Simha Bhatta standing, shouting "My wife! My wife!" and tearing his hair and his clothes. Beside him was his wife Kripa Devi. She was trying to control his frenzy. Even though she was right beside him, he was saying, " Not you! I want my wife!"

Simha Bhatta had gone poor after he lost royal support and shelter. Tarkshya had come to know of his downfall. Simha Bhatta was subject to the disgrace and ignominy of not taking his ritual baths and of not doing the daily adorations of God. He had started to speak obscenities while speaking. While uttering Vedic material he would absent-mindedly speak smut. His wife and children were worried as to what delusory mental state he had slid into. His wife got into the habit of taking him to the Vasanthika Devi temple every Thursday to cure him of it. A Brahmin told Tarkshya that someone who had recited Sama Veda so well at the Vasanthika Devi temple was doing this outside the temple.

Tarkshya let the queen know this.

The queen never thought the son's thoughtlessness would culminate that way. She culled more information, asking subtle questions before saying to herself that she shouldn't delay whatever action she thought fit to be taken. She ordered Tarkshya that Simha Bhatta be taken to His Worship Sage Devadema.

Tarkshya made Simha Bhatta drink some sedative medicine that very night, put him on a chariot and travelled to Amaru.

* * * *

Bhima Bhatta saw Vrisha Bhatta in a hurry the next morning. He took him into the garden, told him about Simha Bhatta before warning him: " "My wife! My wife!" he is lamenting, the old fogey! It seems he is scheming to become the royal priest again, feigning mental derangement."

"No one else can become the royal priest as long as Trasadasyu is the king. I am there always with him, day and night in all his work. He has great faith in me," assured Vrisha.

"It is not that! Her Excellency evinces great interest in matters relating to Simha Bhatta. She could tell her son and call him again to make him the priest!"

Then all at once and in the blink of an eye the picture of the twosome of Her Excellency and Simha Bhatta alone doing the *yaga* in a hut when he was four years old flashed across Vrisha's memory screen.

"Father!" he exclaimed. "I don't know if I told you. I remember something suddenly." He went on to describe the event that had come back to him. "While Simha Bhatta was doing the *homa*, Her Excellency would sit by him to his left and hold his forearm. I have never seen such a *yaga*.

Only a husband-wife pair might do it. This must be a special *yaga*." He tagged on a warning, " Don't let on this to anyone for now. We are sheltered by the king."

Bhima Bhatta went away mulling: Which *yaga* could it have been?

In the next three or four days word that Simha Bhatta's shouts of 'wife!' 'wife!' were expressions of his longing for Her Excellency, and not for his wife spread thickly in the Brahmin neighbourhoods. Those who heard it were frightened, and they kept it to themselves. They didn't take it upto the Kshatriyas.

Tarkshya always had his doubts.

One consolation was that Simha Bhatta never took Her Majesty's name in public. But how could anyone say anything for sure about a crazed being? He might utter that holy name anytime, mightn't he? Let us see what kind of a miracle Sage Devadema wreaks?, thought Tarkshya.

"Shall I send Kripa Devi to tend to the Bhatta?" asked Tarkshya of the sage.

"Not right away. After two weeks," said the sage.

Simha Bhatta was already sixty years old. His nerves had weakened. He had lost control over his body and his speech. It was quite some time since he had coupled with a woman. His Worship Devadema conjectured that his semen had travelled to his brain and that was why he was mentally deranged. He therefore treated him daily with libido-animating methods to rejuvenate his youth for fifteen days. The treatment turned Simha Bhatta into a roused lion. Tarkshya brought Kripa Devi to Amaru. He didn't however bring the children along.

The moment Simha Bhatta saw Kripa Devi, desire stirred in him, and he, tears in eyes, was after her. The

mango orchard proved insufficient for their amorous adventures. The couple entertained themselves, amused themselves on hills, on the banks of brooks, in gardens and on trees for fifteen days. Kripa Devi did feel initially that such sensually inclined behaviour out in the open was unseemly, unbecoming and disgusting. But she bore everything in the satisfied feeling that her husband had after all recognised her.

The ascetic renunciate had them stay in his hermitage for the next fifteen days before bidding them adieu. A delighted Kripa Devi thanked His Worship profusely before returning to Ayodhye along with Simha Bhatta.

The Brahmins of the Brahmin localities who had been quick to harass Simha Bhatta earlier were now suitably impressed by the fact that the couple had shown such deep love even in indigence and in old age. They began to accord him special respect. Back in Ayodhye, the couple spent the next six months in great happiness, respecting all civilized regulations of public behaviour.

It was true that Simha Bhatta moved about in the town like a commoner. Yet there still was room for people to feel suspicious. His greyed hair began to get black. In public groups, he didn't shine as a Vedic Pandit. He slowly acquired a reputation as a poet. All his poems were alive with emotions of high, infatuate love. Whenever his friends visited him, he would treat them to milk and fruit before announcing, "I composed this poem yesterday", and then reading out his poems of love. The refrain of a special poem that he wrote became particularly popular:

kripa kuru kripadevi shayanee meeekripanaa bhava
(Do me a favour, Kripadevi! Don't be stingy in bed!)

People who listened to some of his poems would poke

fun by asking him to recite 'kripa kuru'. Simha Bhatta would at times intone stanzas from Rigveda and at times from Samaveda tunefully and as he did so, the phrase '*kripakuru mahadevi*!' would trip off his tongue.

After they came back to Amaru, the allowance they used to get for their children one-and-a halved that *Yugadi* so the children got to wear good clothes. The official documents didn't change. But what they got was one and a half of what they used to get. This news spread in the Brahmin neighbourhood, and Bhima Bhatta went off to see Vrisha Bhatta. Vrisha Bhatta opened the relevant documents, but the records were as before. He then met the treasurer. "Yes," said the treasurer, "Your record is as before. Her Excellency informed the concerned clerk about this through Tarkshya. Why go myself twice, I thought before sending the additional money right on the *Yugadi* festival day." Bhima Bhatta and Vrishajana took a look at each other.

Vrisha broached this when he sat with Trasadasyu in the chariot with the intention of going for a lounge. "Her Excellency seems still to look upon Simha Bhatta and his children as the royal priests."

"Let her do it", tossed back Trasadasyu absent-mindedly.

"All right. Let her do it. But why this cat-and-mouse game? What they got from the state is one figure. But what they got in fact is one and half of that amount."

"How is that?"

"Her Excellency has sent Tarkshya running to the treasurer and made this happen. 'My account is clean,' says the treasurer, remonstrating against this kind of double accounting. 'But the additional amount that has gone from the

treasury has to be included in Her Excellency's account' "

"How much has gone like this in all?"

"The annual salary of five people is seven hundred *varahas*. An additional amount of two hundred and fifty."

"All right."

"It is all right for you. This means the boys also get the same salary as I do. The younger one is only twelve years old. Even he gets the same salary as I do."

"Oho! Is it an insult to you? You take fifty *varahas* more, all right? Your household expenses are all borne in the palace."

"I am not worried about my annual salary. People in the Brahmin locality are talking about this."

"What are they saying?"

"That Her Majesty harbours a special respect for Simha Bhatta."

"What is wrong if one has a special respect for someone who was till recently a royal priest?"

"My father was also a royal priest for a year, wasn't he?"

"Let us not talk about your father. I became the butt of ridicule, listening to you and making your father the priest at my wedding. Who told you about the talk that is doing the rounds in the Brahmin neighbourhood?"

Vrisha had to inevitably say this: " Bhima Bhatta said it, I think."

"Didn't I say you shouldn't discuss your accounts with Bhima Bhatta?" King Trasadasyu countered.

The dialogue stopped there. It is true that things happened that way. It is also clear that things happened the way they did because of Vrisha's insistence.

Trasadasyu didn't tell this to the treasurer. As he was talking to Queen Purukutsani the following day, Trasadasyu got in a word edgeways, "Have Simha Bhatta's children got more salary this year?" :

"Yes. I have given it from my salary," replied the queen.

The talk took a different direction.

Kripa Devi got waist pain in the next eight months. She took to the bed. Simha Bhatta became a destitute again. His love poetry became the laughing stock of listeners. He then walked along the streets, dressed in shoddy slovenly clothes, his hair dull and dishevelled and sporting a fully grown beard, singing in emotional frenzy:

Kripakuru mahadevi shayane meeekripanaa bhava.

He walked two *haradaris* like this in a frenzied state one afternoon in the direction of the mango grove. There he started shouting at the guardsmen, "Where have you hidden my wife, Kripanadevi? Submit her to me!"

Her Royal Highness had fortunately gone away to Ayodhye that very morning.

Tarkshya who all along had his doubts didn't let Simha Bhatta speak any more, had him sit in the chariot and came to Simha Bhatta's house first. He saw what Kripa Devi's illness was before he had her drink an analgesic medicine mixed with opium. That very night he took them in a chariot to Amaru before farming them out to His Holiness Sage Devadema and returning to Amaru.

Her Excellency returned to Amaru from Ayodhye after two days.

Tarkshya described to the queen Simha Bhatta's behaviour and the events that had happened. He presented

a few styles of his poetry. That Tarkshya was determined today to get some clarifications from the queen was clear from the way he was speaking.

"I don't know what crime this servant of yours has committed, Your Highness! It seems Your Highness's confidence in me has dwindled somewhat. Please pardon me. Ramming our heads on to a wall in the darkness without knowing the background seems difficult to me."

"I have nothing to hide from you. What is the question, tell me clearly."

"What is the reason behind Simha Bhatta's indiscretion?"

"There is a reason!" Saying this, Her Excellency clammed up. Tarkshya hadn't expected such clarity.

"Come along! I will show you the reason," said the queen before she walked out. Tarkshya followed her, keeping a distance.

The queen sat on the mud-and-stone bench beside the water tank in the grove. Tarkshya stood at a distance, his arms entwined in each other against his belly.

"What are these?" asked the queen pointing toward the mango trees.

"These are mango flowers."

"What are the insects which hover around them?"

"Honeybees."

"What is the dust on their legs?"

"The pollen dust of the mango flowers."

"Does the bee know the dust on which bee's legs is responsible for which mango fruit?"

"No, it doesn't."

"We don't find in human beings the magnanimity that we see in animals. Do you agree?"

Tarkshya stood crestfallen and answerless.

"Tarkshya! Shall I ask you a question?"

"Yes, please, Your Highness!"

"You asked for retirement. That was the reason why the burden of Trasadasyu's education fell on you. Did you get your retirement by this? "

"No, I didn't. True."

"Man never has retirement. What man wants is not superannuation, but supreme happiness."

"True, Your Royal Highness!"

"Is Trasadasyu a good student to you?"

"He is simple, innocent and righteous."

"You haven't been appointed to teach him deceipt and dissimulation."

"He doesn't have your political astuteness, Your Highness!"

"Did I have? Even I don't know fraud and deceipt. My only aim in life is that everyone should prosper. Kings should have vision. Our guru had sent word of a possible enemy incursion from the west. I paid attention to the west. That's all. There was no adroitness in this. It might appear like that to outsiders. There's no reason why it should appear so to you."

"I didn't know there is fear of an attack from the west."

"All right. I will tell you when I come to know, all right?"

"All right, Your Royal Ladyship!"

"Will you give up talking about your retirement."

"I have given up, Maharani!" replied Tarkshya, excited enthusiasm marking his voice.

"I have given everything over to Trasadasyu. It's upto you to earn his trust and confidence. Vrisha is close to him in every respect. Trasadasyu shouldn't feel that I have coaxed you into going to him. That wouldn't be good for the state."

"True, *Maharani*!"

"You are not to teach just archery, charioteering and horse-riding. Let this be understood."

Tarkshya travelled to Ayodhye the very next day. He saw King Trasadasyu and said, "Your Highness! I've taught you all kinds of skills I know. Only one remains."

"What is that"?

"That is the skill of driving a chariot blindfold through the streets."

"What is the use of learning that skill?"

"We could go about at nights and catch thieves and wicked antisocial citizens on available clue."

"The teaching of this skill began in right earnest that evening. Since it was a two-seater chariot, the nuisance of Vrisha was averted."

Vrisha and Trasadasyu were estranged to an extent because of the yearly-salary episode. The two of them would lounge about in the city in the evenings in the chariot. But there was no zest in their interactions, no vim and verve, the kind that existed before. Trasadasyu had thought that Vrisha was narrow-minded. He had started to deliberately ignore whatever Vrisha said. Vrisha's words had begun to get stiff too.

This new plan of Trasadasyu's put this estrangement on hold.

People who saw Tarkshya and the king go about the city streets developed a confidence in Tarkshya. In the

process the demand for Vrisha Bhatta and Vrisha Bhatta's influence, value and prestige took a nosedive. Whatever messages, requests were to be conveyed to the king began to come to Tarkshya. Brahmins met Tarkshya with alacrity and told him, "The complaint that you preferred about Bhima Bhatta was our mistake. Vrisha Bhatta is completely ignoring you."

Tarkshya said no more than: "Let's see," as he realized that ' the price of Brahmin politics is a couple of hundreds of *varahas*. All their hates, jealousies and spites end with it. You should impress them only with words.'

He got together a function to mark the end of the king's education, gave every Brahmin a meal, and a priestly fee of five *varahas*. He pocketed a thousand *varahas* as his teacherly present. He gifted the king a gem-studded dagger that had his name cut into it as his memento. Happiness flowed everywhere. Even Vrisha who got a present of six *varahas* as the royal priest was delighted. At the end of the day's programme, the king moved about in the city wearing a blindfold. When he returned to the palace, he was greeted with a rousing roar of victory.

Ayodhye benefited in as little a period as a month from the skills that Trasadasyu had learnt.

The news came that the feudal chieftain of Mallabantas raided some Ayodhye villages near the Kanyakubja border, killed some villagers and took away some two hundred heads of cattle. Even as the army commander advised Trasadasyu against it, Trasadasyu rushed to the Kanyakubja border with fifty horsemen. On enquiry with the villagers, it was learnt that an Ayodhye farmer had forcibly taken away a Kanyakubja girl, and

Shambara, the petty feudal chieftain had attacked in retaliation. Trasadasyu sent for the farmer. The girl also turned up along with the farmer. The girl had attained majority. "I have run away of my own will," said the girl, her voice ringing loud and clear. "I was being hassled by my step mother. I came here with him and married him before Goddess Devi and the village elders. I wouldn't like to go back." The boy however stayed silent. "Are you prepared to marry her and live with her?" he was asked. He simply nodded his head. Not being satisfied, the king then ruled that the two of them should come to Ayodhye within a week and tie the knot again in the Avanthikadevi temple.

Cattle belonging to various people had been stolen. King Trasadasyu was however hesitant to cross the border. ' We have to cross the border to get the cattle back.' he thought. 'I could stay back and send fifteen horsemen to go searching. If somebody asks them about where they are headed, they should say they are there because they have lost their way.'

A village-elder piped up: "If fifteen horsemen go searching, it is as good as giving up the horsemen in addition to the heads of cattle that we have already lost. Shambarasura is not a petty chieftain but a robber. His word goes in the forts that dot the border. He has been a great annoyance, and the king of Kanyakubja is fed up. After the pillage the cattle secretively reach either Kampilya or Dasharna in a week's time. There they are sold to butchers. The attempts that the Kanyakubja king made to nab him have been futile. Shambarasura has two hundred followers. The fort chiefs all along this long border listen to him because of the pillage and killing that they indulge in. He carries out his killings and robbings with their help. Sending off fifteen of our men is as good as bundling them off for a sacrifice to their Goddess!"

Trasadasyu reckoned this a personal challenge.

A commander took up the word in the meanwhile: "What you are saying might be true. If His Excellency agrees, all the fifty of us could cross the border and go on a hunt. Will you arrange for his stay here till we get back?"

"I will also come along with the fifty people," Trasadasyu tossed back as he flared up. "I will come as a robber. There need be no doubts."

"His Excellency stepping into another kingdom is against royal ethics."

"There is no question of royal ethics here! Robbers are robbers. Let there not be any protection in the name of royal ethics for a robber whom the Kanyakubja king himself doesn't want."

"We will also accompany the king!" weighed in the villagers, their voices coming across in a chime.

"All right," agreed Trasadasyu .

"Your Excellency! Our villagers have lost cattle. In case we get them we need people to drive them back," submitted the village elder. "I'll come and show a few places I know." Trasadasyu had him sit in his own chariot. Another fifty people sat on horses behind the riders. Behind them came thirty youth running. Leading them was the king in his chariot. Everyone got into the woods on the Kanyakubja border. At a turn after they had traversed a distance of a *haradari*, the elder asked the charioteer to be driven further, right through the woods. They came by a glade after a while. There was a brook flowing, and grassland framed the scene. There were cattle grazing with no one guarding them.

A graveyardly silence charged the atmosphere.

The king first of all had the villagers dismount before ordering them to drive the cattle home.

Holding the nose-cords of the cattle, the villagers led them, taking the path they'd come by. His Excellency had told the village elder to sound a shrill piercing cry-signal when they covered half the distance and again when they reached the border. The cry-signal took longer than expected to come because with the cattle stopping to graze on the way, the cattle owners had to pull at them and shoo them back onto their paths. The first cry-signal was heard after about an hour.

The king and his fifty horsemen rode their horses toward the previously appointed muster point. It was already dusk. The horses were cantering along, piercing the darkness of the woods. Since the king's was the only chariot, it pulled ahead, separating from the other horsemen. By the time they got out of the woods and onto the country path, there was a considerable distance created between the king's chariot and the horsemen. In fact the king became a loner. He had already had his doubts, the doubts driving into his head because of the graveyardly silence obtaining in the forest glade. Before the king could call the last horseman, fifteen of Shambara's foot soldiers surrounded his chariot. Two jumped from a tree right into the chariot. Brandishing his sword, however, Trasadasyu made them get down from the chariot. Holding the nose-cords of the horses, four of them began to tug the chariot toward the forest.

It wasn't impossible for the king to drive the chariot out of their reach. Had he merely signalled to the horses with his whip, they would have galloped away leaving Shambarasura's men behind.

It didn't seem proper for Trasadasyu's code of heroic ethics to call his horsemen once people hemmed him in.

A desire to see where Shambarusara's men would take him stirred in Trasadasyu and gained strength.

They went past a couple of trees, and there stood a fair man with a gorgeous body. The men seemed to lug the chariot toward him. He also made soundless signals, thus making the chariot come toward him. There was a long dazzling dagger in his hand. It was so long that it seemed to reach from his chest upto his toes. Trasadasyu hadn't seen such long swords anywhere in India.

May be because they saw the sword or because the sheen dazzled their eyes, the horses started to neigh and jib. The man with the grand frame bent down a bit in order to dodge their flailing legs.

In the blink of an eye by some miracle or something, Trasadasyu's sword poised menacingly against Shambarasura's chest. His dagger was inside the handle of Shambarasura's sword.

"If your hand so much as shakes, your fingers will get cut. If your body shakes, the sword will pierce your chest," deadpanned Trasadasyu, his tone one of calm unbeatable confidence. "You get into the chariot so none of these happens. Tell your henchmen to go home."

"Where should I come?"

"You should come to Renu village on the Ayodhye border. I will see that you don't come to any harm."

"Why there? We could talk here, can't we?"

"A girl of this kingdom has come away with a youth from our kingdom. To avenge this, your people have taken away some two hundred heads of cattle from our land. I

have spoken to the girl. She has married him. I will have her meet you. You may yourself enquire."

Shambarasura asked his men to go off home. He gingerly climbed on to the chariot. Trasadasyu laid Shambarasura's heavy sword down in the chariot before sitting with his leg on it. He positioned his own sword on Shambarasura's chest. Turning the chariot back, he drove toward the appointed muster point.

Worried that the king didn't follow them, some horsemen had come back a little distance. They were surprised to see Shambarasura sitting shadowed by Trasadasyu's sword. "Let us go!" he said as he joined them.

All the horsemen had gathered together at the muster point. "Let's not wait for the cry-signal," suggested Trasadasyu. The horsemen reached the village as well about the same time the cattle reached it.

The village elder's face contorted just as he saw Shambarasura. "He is Shambarasura!" he yelled.

"Calm down! Shambarasura is our guest now!" said Trasadasyu, coming back at the village elder.

There was another meeting in the village community hall after the meal. The woman who had run away from Kanyakubja presented herself along with her husband. Her speech was blunted somewhat. She was quiet but she stuck out her chest in a self-assertive gesture. Shambarasura walked toward the girl. The girl turned her face away.

"Kleo Rani! Why didn't you see me? If you wanted this boy, I'd have carried him from here and married him off to you!"

"I could come and see you only if Hiradevi let me go out of the house, couldn't I?"

"Didn't I come myself to your house to see Retsappa?"

"If I talked to you, Hiradevi had threatened to thrust a cinder into my mouth. She had branded my leg once," said the girl, stretching and showing her leg. There was a big black scar on it.

"All right. Will you come home now?"

"Which home?"

"My home."

"I can come to your house, but not to my father's place. From now on, Renu village is my home."

"Did you like this boy and marry him?"

"I ran away from home and hid in the woods. Chitta was going this way, grazing a buffalo. "Where do you want to go?" he asked. "Anywhere except here!" I answered. "Would Renu village do?" he asked." "Yes, it would," I said. I got on the buffalo. He held me so I didn't fall. I related to him my story. "Will you marry me?" he asked. "Yes, agreed," I replied. After we got to the village, his neighbours started to scold him. Our wedding took place at the temple in the presence of village elders. This is all that happened."

Shambarasura heaved a sigh before he said, "Will you stay back here?"

"Yes."

"Do you know that this doesn't agree with our morally obligatory code of conduct?"

"A wife's prescribed duty is to be with her husband."

Shambarasura didn't say anything in response. He simply nodded his head. Turning back, he walked over and sat by Trasadasyu.

Trasadasyu called Chitta over.

"Is what your wife said right?"

"Yes, it is, Your Excellency!"

"Do you have the necessary means to look after her?"

"We will together tend cattle."

"Why did your neighbours browbeat you?"

"For marrying a girl belonging to a *rakshasa* community."

"Your parents died when I was a child."

"What are you doing for a living?"

"I don't have a definite job. I do many household chores of many houses. The main occupation is cattle tending. I also do repair works of gardens, banks and streams. My neighbours presented me with a buffalo at the time of the wedding."

Trasadasyu looked Chitta over intently. Chitta was short but was well built. His face shone with the radiant glow of health.

"How many of the cattle that you tended were lost?"

"All were tended by me. None of the cows that I tend had been stolen so far. I had lost only one buffalo. I went looking for it in the darkness. That was when I got Kleo. It was only this time that all my cows went missing, and I was humiliated. I escaped from the robbers, came and reported to the village headman."

Trasadasyu took a look at the elder. He nodded his head to signal agreement. Trasadasyu asked Shambarasura, his voice pitched high, "you seem to know that woman."

"*saa mee dauhitri. Anantaram tasyaha vaartaam vadishye*[1]" he said in the pure Sanskrit of Hastinapura-Mathura so that others didn't understand him[2].

1. This means 'She is my granddaughter. I will tell her story afterwards.'

The others knew only the varieties of Suraseni, Ayodhyaa and Kanyakubjaa.

"So be it!" agreed Trasadasyu, saying it in Sanskrit.

The meeting ended. Shambarasura narrated the whole story to Trasadasyu in a different room after the meal:

"Kleo Rani is my grand daughter. That is, my daughter's daughter. We are basically from the land of Arman. Our caste is Lakulisha[3]. We are the original Pashupathas. Our forefathers were Lakulisha's disciples. We were expelled from Arman, and we migrated to India. Our elders settled in Kurujangala. All the Nagas joined our people because of Lakulisha's influence. Although our religion is the same, we belong to different lineages. As the population of the Nagas burgeoned, they settled in Kurujangala too. They began to trouble our people. Unable to bear the harassment, our people settled down in these forests. People of this region wrongly call us *asuras*, the demons. Indians feel every foreigner is an *asura*. We are not *asuras*. We are mleechhas, a Nonaryan race. We were originally devotees of God Maloch. We became Lakulishas when Lakulisha came into our fold. Branching into groups, we settled at different places after Armanians expelled us. One of our groups settled down in Kurujangala in India. We have so far preserved the purity of blood of our race. We marry off our daughters into our own race. Our people don't marry girls from this region. I told my daughter about the essence of this religion. She is already tainted. My people won't let her into their fold."

"My daughter died by god's will about ten years ago. My son-in-law married again. He married an orphan. I didn't know that she would become as strong and haunt my

2. Armenia

3. Hercules

granddaughter to this extent. Neither her father nor I am at one place. For a long time. I have built seven forts along this border. It is not my intention to be an enemy of Kanyakubja. Ours is a small population. We raise horses. We move about on horsebacks. Our horses can be found in many countries. We also make and sell dirks, daggers, and knives. In fact we earn our keep by the sales done in Kanyakubja. I have no intention of building an independent nation with this. We earn our livelihood by going over to Kampilya and Dasharna and selling cattle, arms, horses and meat. However our people find it impossible to live, adjusting with others. Our very complexion has separated us from others. The purity of our blood has preserved our independence. That the progeny of impure blood is to begin with my own granddaughter is a dishonour to me. This girl is yours from now on. Her protection is now your responsibility. If I take her back, my people cannot treat her with dignity and respect. I have kept before you a sickle and a pumpkin.'

"If that is the case, she staying on the Kanyakubja border doesn't seem proper to me."

"Yes, it doesn't look proper to me either. She might feel like seeing her people at some point in the future. Or she might develop differences with her husband."

"You don't worry about her. I will take the couple to Ayodhye. I will give them appropriate work to do. Whatever that is, my desire is that you should come along with me to Ayodhye and stay there for a week. I am a Naga Kshatriya too. Lakulisha is our first or premieval guru. It seems to me that I could get more information by discussing it with you."

"All right. But Let me inform this to my people and

come back. If I don't return by tomorrow, they might mount another attack. May I ask a question before that? You took possession of me by sticking a dagger in the handle of my sword. Where did you get that dagger?"

"My guru Tarkshya gave it to me at the end of my training."

"It was my grandfather who made that dagger. Tarkshya had his training with us. It was my grandfather himself who presented it to him as a mark of their friendship. I grew absent-minded and nostalgic the moment I recognized it."

"Didn't you send your men home?"

"Two would be waiting for me at an appointed muster point."

Shambarasura returned in an hour after arranging everything. He sent word to his people through the two confidantes that in his absence everything would be looked after by his elder sister's son, Nikambasura. He also said that he had come by a new supporter and that he would go with him to Ayodhye and consolidate their friendship before returning. He said not a word about his granddaughter.

Trasadasyu had Shambarasura sleep by his side. He asked him subtle questions about his special relationship with the Kanyakubja king. Shambarasura answered all his questions without any hesitation. "Kanyakubja king is angry with us without any reason," he said. "He has prohibited the sale of our products in their markets. We are forced to sell our wares either in Kampilya or Dasharna. There are no restrictions for merchants from these states to trade in Kanyakubja. They sell at double the price merchandise that we sell them. We have to pay a heavy toll

on our way to Kampilya and Dasharna. Or else we have to transport goods averting their eyes. The king himself has insisted that we avoid his toll officials. He doesn't treat us like Kanyakubja people." Shambarasura also described the kind of money that the officials at the tollgates made before elucidating the plight his people were into: " We on our part pay the toll freely. We can't complain to the king about them. Nor could we live without them."

The villagers celebrated the return of their cattle the following day. They tied an ensign to their horns, applied vermilion and turmeric, and came to the place the king was staying at with musical fanfare. They took the king in a procession through the city before bidding him farewell. Trasadasyu took Shambarasura, Kleo Rani and Chitta along to Ayodhye.

The news that Trasadasyu had taken Shambarasura prisoner had already spread in Ayodhye. However many were disappointed that Shambarasura was not treated like a prisoner. The first meeting after Trasadasyu reached Ayodhye was with Tarkshya. Tarkshya had spent five or six years in the Kanyakubja woods, learning quite a few skills from Shambarasura's grandfather. Shambara was then eighteen years old. Although it was difficult to recognize him now, the picture of him as a pudgy little boy was imprinted in his mind. Seeing Shambara's grand frame, Tarkshya said:" You are your grandpa's image. When I learnt my skills with your grandfather, he was very much like you."

Shambara recounted the events that took place before he quacked in peroration, "I was taken prisoner with the dagger that my grandfather gave you!" When he heard this, Tarkshya who hadn't all along thought much of Trasadasyu

as his pupil wondered how he would have behaved had he been in Trasadasyu's place. The feeling that what Trasadasyu did was a fine thing came over Tarkshya, and the feeling of disrespect that he had about Trasadasyu dissipated.

Although Takshya was spoken to in such a friendly manner, he didn't give up his politicking propensities. He took Trasadasyu aside. "I admire your skills. But we should be careful. Too much respect is not desirable, Your Excellency!" he harrumped. "Let there be no open favourable treatment given. The people of Ayodhye are basking in the proud feeling that their king has taken Shambarasura prisoner. But they are at the same time disappointed by the undue respect you have shown him. This doesn't mean you should handcuff him and parade him in a demeaning procession through the streets. Shambarasura's people wouldn't like their leader being insulted. There is even more important matter than this. I am doubtful whether I should tell you or not."

"Tell me! You need have no doubts."

"King Suhotra of Kanyakubja recognizes Shambarasura only as a thief. We needn't worry about it. King Suhotra is an old fogey. Nobody pays heed to his words. But now his grandson Jahnu has come of age. He is intelligent and influential. He is already into handling the affairs of the state. Suhotra's sons are legitimate princes. There is no problem if they become kings. But we have heard that King Suhotra is going to make Jahnu the king. Jahnu shouldn't come to know about the treatment accorded to Shambarasura."

"What should we do then?"

"Let Shambarasura be with his granddaughter for now.

Let the people's excitement sag. We should not have an open display about this, it seems to me. Having said this, it is upto Your Excellency."

"Let's do as you say."

Tarkshya called the manager and asked him to arrange for Shambarasura's, Kleo Rani's and Chitta's stay in the room behind the imposing building beside the palace and to bring Shambarasura straight to his room through the backdoor whenever he asked him to. The manager understood it. He furnished and furbished the room so they didn't suffer for want of anything. He told the watchman to let him enter through the western door. He saw that the friendship and the interactions between Trasadasyu and Shambarasura went on without any fuss or hassle.

Shambarasura came to have enormous trust in Trasadasyu in a week's time. The fact that Trasadasyu afforded refuge to his granddaughter, his skills with arms, his discrete, discriminating and prudent nature and everything about Trasadasyu made Trasadasyu look like a role model to Shambarasura. Besides, such stable, settled life agreed with him better than the itinerant ascetic life that he used to lead which took him from town to town and fort to fort. Many theoretical, political and military matters came up for discussion in their morning and evening confabulations. The pervert thoughts that Shambarasura harboured in his mind about the behaviour of Indians disappeared. His main objection was that Indians accepted their gods, but they frowned upon their lineage. 'It is accepted in the Vedas that the name 'hara' is a form of our God Hercules,' he told himself wordlessly. 'We are the descendants of Hercules. Yet Indians look down upon us, dubbing us ogres and asuras.' He felt that this was the

reason why purity of blood was the fundamental principle of their religion. This feeling hadn't completely disappeared. But the severity of this feeling took a beating from his friendship with Trasadasyu. When he came to know the details of the harassments that Kleo was subjected to by her step mother Shamabarasura grew doubtful about whether it was possible to establish a pure race, a pure lineage. His was a simple and open mind. He would express whatever he felt then and there. He told Trasadasyu his people were experts in preparing swords, dirks etc, that his forefathers knew how to make an explosive called 'bhushundi', that its use was limited in India, and that they still had one bhushundi with them. Trasadasyu didn't evince much interest in it. He expressed his wish to possess such a weapon. "You can take it", volunteered Shambarasura. "What about for you?" asked Trasadasyu. "I will have another made," replied Shambarasura.

In a word, Shambarasura spent one week as Trasadasyu's personal friend. "I have farmed out my granddaughter to you," he said as he left.

Chitta wasn't mentally sharp. But he was extremely good with his hands. It seemed as if God had kept all his brains in his hands. He would do whatever he was asked to do with a great dexterity of hands. Trasadasyu thought about what work to give him before he appointed him Tarkshya's servant.

Trasadasyu assigned Kleo the work of teaching Queen Padmavati the Lakulisha scriptures and the mantras in the Arman language and of making their hairdos. Kleo didn't know these things. But she had the courage of speech. That she had got some shelter shored up her confidence. She began

visiting Queen Padmavati, bold in the belief that she would teach whatever she knew. The secret skills she knew then came to light. She was a great cook. She began cooking and serving their special delights to the king and queen in Ayodhye. The words of praise that the royal couple spoke were the supporting strength of her life, she thought.

Both Chitta and Kleo Rani merged seamlessly into the river of life in Ayodhye.

Trasadasyu-2

It might have been two or three months since Shambarasura left. An incident that threatened to vitiate Trasadasyu's life took place.

One evening when Tarkshya went off to the mango orchard on some work, Trasadasyu set off alone in his chariot on a pleasure trip around the city. He ran into Vrisha on the way. Vrisha signalled 'stop' with his hand before climbing into the chariot. It was quite some time since he had been taken in a chariot. "I want to come with you today in your chariot," he said as he got into the chariot. Vrisha's company was not welcome to Trasadasyu. It was positively, wearisomely disgusting. Yet because Vrisha was an old friend, Trasadasyu said, "You can come!", intolerance edging his voice.

Vrisha did all the talking. The king simply muttered an indolent 'hun' meaning 'yes', and an indolent 'uhun' meaning 'no'. This kind of dialogue went on for half an hour, and it irritated Vrisha no end. Vrisha wanted to show the king how the king was speaking. So, without showing his anger outwardly, he said to the king, "I will drive the chariot. Give me the reins."

"These horses are used to a particular way of pulling at the reins. They will get frightened if a stranger does it," averred Trasadasyu by way of information.

"What kind of a charioteer are you? Horses don't frighten with good charioteers. Is it impossible for you to manage?"

"We are going to the city now. People throng the streets in the evening. Let's not go there now. Let's go out of town."

"It seems you can drive the chariot through a throng blindfold. You have kept me away on the pretext of learning that skill," said Vrisha.

"All right. You drive the chariot yourself! It is not a pretext. It is a genuine skill."

"I hear you captured Shambarasura in the dark with that very skill!"

"Shambarasura came on his own."

"Even *asuras* come to Ayodhye as guests to be treated as gods. Ayodhyeyins don't get that honour."

Softly and silently raising the reins, the king held them before Vrisha.

In the hustle of holding the reins, two of the reins fell on the chariot. "This chariot has four horses," said His Majesty as he picked up the reins and handed them to Vrisha.

No sooner did the reins loosen than the horses in the front row broke free before segueing into a gallop. The king himself held the reins tight and brought the horses under control. The horses then steadied into their usual slow unhurried pace.

"Hold the reins at the distance that I held them." Saying this the king handed the reins back to Vrisha.

Vrisha said 'hun' mimicking the king's voice in a show of reticence and reserve.

In the meanwhile, working loose from his parents' hands, an eight-year-old boy moved right in front of the speeding chariot.

Vrisha pulled the wrong rein.

One of the wheels rolled over the child's leg.

Trasadasyu grabbed the reins from Vrisha's hands in an instant.

The mishap however had come off.

The child let out a loud ragged screech.

"Go bring the child!" ordered the king.

Vrisha ran up, carried the child over and laid it down in the chariot. The child's parents came running in Vrisha's wake.

King Trasadasyu indicated to his parents to climb into the chariot before driving the chariot toward the royal physician's residence.

Vrisha kept standing where he stood. People crowded round him.

"This king drives chariots wearing a blindfold, they say. Why would he worry about children walking the streets? What would he lose if they die?" Vrisha started saying.

* * * *

Those who listened to Vrisha indeed thought the child had died.

The child's leg had been injured.

The royal physician washed the wound, dabbed some medicine on it before making the child sleep in his own house. The parents also slept there. Trasadasyu went to their place, let them know about the accident, and brought the other children of the household over to the palace, fed them a meal and had them sleep right there.

Dwelling on it the whole night, the king grew very furious with Vrisha.

Getting to know of the news, Tarkshya came running to the palace in the small hours of the morning.

"Tell the parents to prefer a complaint through the police officer," Trasadasyu told Tarkshya flying off the handle.

"Let some days pass, Your Highness! If the child's health improves, why the complaint?"

"You also support Vrisha, do you?"

"No, I don't support Vrisha, Your Highness!"

"If you are unwilling, I will go and tell his parents."

"What am I after all, my lord, to disobey you? But..."

"But what?"

"It wouldn't be against royal ethics for Your Highness to stand as a witness in the court."

Tarkshya toned down his words the best way he could. But the king, drowned as he was in a river of grief, saw only the wrong meaning.

"Yes, I will myself stand as a witness. Vrisha must be punished."

"Your Majesty! It is not as easy as you think. If you order me, I will punish Vrisha in such a way that he will remember it till his dying day. Even while being alive, he should feel 'it is better to die'. But to move the court for this doesn't look right to me. Please wait! I will go over to the mango orchard and bring Her Excellency in half an hour. She is not in the know of this accident. When I started from there, she was still asleep. Let's inform her before proceeding further."

"All right! Come back quickly."

Tarkshya mounted his horse and galloped off to the mango grove.

Her Majesty had had her bath and had sat for the morning adoration of God by that time.

Tarkshaya had to wait till she ended her *pooje*.

This delay further enraged Trasadasyu.

Without even having his bath, he got on his horse and rode toward the royal physician.

The fever had escalated and the child was shivering.

The parents were sitting by him on the bed, the patina of tears in their eyes.

Seeing, as he did, the pitiful scene, Trasadasyu didn't take any precipitate action. He also sat on the bed, gently stroking the child's head.

The child's legs had swollen because of the staunching of the untimely flow of blood. His young blood vessels stood out all over his legs. The body was burning hot.

In the meantime a gendarme conveyed the news that Her Excellency had reached the palace and she wanted to see His Excellency.

Trasadasyu didn't want to depart, leaving the injured child behind. The parents however insisted that he leave. He left in frenzied agitation, respecting the parents' words.

Noticing his absent-mindedness, Her Highness asked, "How is the child?"

"The leg has swollen. The temperature has gone up. He is moaning in discomfort."

There had already been some discussion, it seemed, of what should be done. Her Excellency took a look at Tarkshya. Tarkshya in turn clapped his hands. Chitta, who had been standing outside, came in, and stood silently, his arms folded in reverence.

"Chitta knows about some herbs which can cure the wound in a few days.'

Trasadasyu took a look at Chitta.

"Did the physician wash the wound, Your Honour?" asked Chitta.

"Yes, he did. He washed and bandaged it." replied Trasadasyu.

"If that is the case, we might have to wait a couple of days for it to heal. One should not wash it. One should let the blood flow. The blood will coagulate after a while. Before that happens, if we grind a couple of herbs and apply, the wound will heal in a couple of days. If on the other hand you wash it, the blood flow will stop and there will be a swelling." explained Chitta.

"You speak as though you know better than a physician!" exclaimed Trasadasyu.

"An aggressive rampaging cow had butted me here!" Chitta went on, showing his belly. "My guts came out. The village headman ground the herbs and dabbed the wound with it, and the injury was cured. New skin began to grow in just four days. Then he told me the names of those herbs, and taught me how to heal such wounds myself. If I get injured when I am out of the village, I do this. You see I have the scars left behind these wounds all over." He showed his arms, legs, the belly and other parts! There were scars at six different places. The wound on his great toe had extended up to the bone.

"This happened when I was cutting a tree with an axe. I thought I had lost my toe. The toe is hanging loose by virtue of the newly formed skin."

"What are these herbs?"

"The village headman told me not to let out the names. If you want to know, I can ask him and let you know."

"Should we go to Renu village for these herbs?"

"No, we needn't. They grow everywhere. I have in fact seen them here in Ayodhye!"

"You grind some and keep them with you. If the physician agrees, we will use it."

Tarkshya gestured, and Chitta walked out, toward the woods.

"We are done with one problem. Now let us discuss the enquiry into the accident. Sit!" said Her Excellency.

"The learning that I had painstakingly internalized came to nought in the blink of an eye. My reputation of driving the chariot blindfold came unstuck in a jiffy. But the infamy of having moved the chariot over a small child on the street will remain forever!"

"Did you move the chariot over the boy?"

"It wasn't I who did it. It was Vrisha Bhatta who taunted me and shamed me before taking hold of the reins."

"Why did you give him the reins?"

"Trasadasyu was on the point of saying, " On the pretext of driving a chariot blindfold," but then he realised his mistake. It struck him that it was stupid to brag about his fame in the presence of Tarkshya who in fact had taught him the skill. Wrapped as he was in his grief, he completely forgot Tarkshya's presence.

"May Tarkshya please grant me pardon! Absorbed in my sorrow, I said things I shouldn't have."

Tarkshya gave a slight smile, and the smile provoked Trasadasyu's arrogance. He didn't say anything right then, but what he did say subsequently seemed to be counterarguments to Tarkshya.

"Vrisha Bhatta provoked me with the taunt that I kept him away on the pretext of driving the chariot blindfold.

He talked lightly about Shambarasura. Irritated by that, I handed him the reins, it is true."

"Had Vrisha Bhatta at any time earlier taken up the reins when he rode with you in the chariot?"

"Never. He used always to say 'If you hold the reins, people call you the king. If I hold them, people ridicule me calling me the charioteer,"

"Giving him the reins was your first mistake. Vrisha will highlight this point at the time of any inquiry. This is the greatest anxiety in moving the court," said Her Excellency.

"I will stand as the witness."

"It won't be long before a witness becomes the accused. If you so wish, you become the plaintiff by preferring a report."

"Why?"

"Putting the plaintiff in the place of the accused is rarely done"

"What if I get my name recorded as a witness by making the parents prefer a report?"

"You will have to show your mistake in your statement as the witness."

"I could tell the truth. I could say what kind of perturbing taunt provoked me to hand over the reins! Doesn't the judge know the difference between an honest statement and an equivocal statement. Are Ayodhye judges that ignorant?"

"Whatever the perturbance, the incident that has happened is that you gave the reins over to a man like Vrisha Bhatta. This was a mistake. Standing witness against Vrisha Bhatta would be another mistake. You will

have to go to court as the accused. At the most, Vrisha would be the first accused. You would be the second accused. Even if Vrisha admits his mistake, you are sure to be considered partially guilty as well."

"Are you saying we can't believe courts of justice? I do have faith in courts, madam!"

The discussion ground to a stop with that sentence.

After a while Trasadasyu started to blabber in still greater indignation:

"The whole of Ayodhye knows what kind of a man I am and what kind of a man Vrisha is. 'You are as good in discrimination and judgement, and as competent in matters of justice and morality as you are in war,' Shambarasura was saying just the other day. 'You captured in an instant someone whom the Kanyakubja king couldn't nab. You gave shelter to my destitute granddaughter. I don't know which is more praiseworthy.' The guru could teach something to someone. But the expertise in that which is learnt is to be seen only in real action. Tarkshya of course knows the skill of driving the chariot, wearing a blindfold, but could he have summoned the courage to nab Shambarasura? Let him answer this himself."

Tarkshya nodded his head, meaning 'no'. Tarkshya might have imparted learning to many people. But how many pupils has he got who could capture Shambarasura?"

Tarkshya shook his head, indicating, 'There is nobody.'

"Then there is Vrisha Bhatta. The people of Ayodhye know his mettle. I appointed his father Bhima Bhatta as the priest to officiate in my wedding just to satisfy him. Forget about his greed for the priestly fee, his father was criticised

by his caste-fellows for not intoning the mantras well. He thus insulted me. One could imagine the ability of the son when such is the case of the father."

"You made him the royal priest and kept him in the palace!" commented the queen.

"I did that to keep him off his father. I will sack him tomorrow. I have received so many complaints against him."

"Complaints come when one is in power. So do appreciation and encomiums. All these are transient. What endures in the end is the work one has done."

"Do you also back Vrisha?"

"I don't back anyone. I can't see you move the court and stand as a witness there. I will go to Amaru tomorrow. I will come back to the mango orchard after your trial in the court. Let's not talk any more. Who knows what is written on your forehead? I will say one last thing before I leave. You don't have my permission to go to court. Shed your anger and grief. Take the path of discrimination and wisdom. Anger is a sign of arrogance. Vrisha might have made a mistake. You will have to admit your mistake in order to prove his fault. That is how I see it. It is upto you after this."

Her Highness rose from her seat.

"The healing of the boy's wound is our first need. Chitta has said it will take four or five days. Let it take ten or even fifteen days. Let's think about other things after that. May His Excellency please pardon me," Tarkshya said again.

There was no remission yet of Trasadasyu's unease. The feeling that he was all alone in the world came over him all on a sudden. But the sentence "Mother shouldn't go

to Amaru!" didn't come out of his mouth. He walked quietly over to his room. To mull things over.

* * * *

The king thought over thing again and again

The more and longer he thought, the more nonplussed he got. The occlusive cloud of not knowing what he ought to do in the moment obfuscated him.

The more he thought, the more did the subtle meanings of the dialogue between his mother and Tarkshya, his own imaginary, self-created meanings, meanings induced by anger, meanings induced by arrogance hit the king in wave after wave.

'..Our first need is the healing of the wound. In case, instead, the child dies, someone must face the death penalty.Death penalty for one? Or for two?' tense thoughts chased through the king's mind. 'I have seen the child. I have felt deep sympathy. I have seen the moist emotions of his parents. From what did my feeling that the child's wound should heal arise out of? Was it out of sympathy for the citizens or out of the need to lessen the punishment? What punishment? Isn't the agitated disquiet that I am in now also a punishment? Does Vrisha also have this kind of commotion in him? Or is he happy? Does he have any idea of the huge rock that is dangling menacingly over his head? Why should I rack my head about Vrisha's state of mind? I should ask him to leave the palace this very evening.'

He clapped. A servant appeared. "Vrisha should leave the palace before this evening. Otherwise hold him by his nape and push him out."

"He left last night itself, piling a cart with his things. He has spread the word that the child died, Your Highness!"

"Is that so?" exclaimed the king rhetorically as he suddenly sat up. "The child hasn't died. Tomtom on all lanes and streets that his wound will heal in eight days and that he will come in front of Vrisha's house uttering cry-signals."

He then set to thinking again. The same thought. If you go by the looks of the parents, they seem to be Brahmins. If the child dies, the charge of killing a Brahmin would be upon me, he told himself falling into a meditation. Who is the one who is going to be charged? Even if both Vrisha and me share the blame, both of us will go to hell. Will this poor rustic heal the wound? What if the physician says no? What if the physician says the treatment he gave was right? What if I overrule the physician and let this villager go ahead with his treatment, and if the wound doesn't heal even with his treatment? I will have in that case to bear three-fourths of the charge of killing a Brahmin.What if I become the plaintiff as mother said? Will that be the route of escape from the court? What if Vrisha argues that that is a way to avoid law and protect oneself, and in case the *panchayat* agrees with it? What about the idea of getting a written complaint preferred by the parents and handing it to the police officer, recording my name therein as a witness? If I as the witness confess my mistake, will I be still punishable? Or shall I mete out the punishment myself? Twenty whip lashes for Vrisha and ten for me. What if Bhima Bhatta complains that the servant who did the caning did it with more severity to Vrisha than to me? Whatever it may be, everything should be submitted to the open assembly of the *panchayat*. Both of us are bound by the *panchayat*'s decision. Then I will have avoided atleast the turmoil of conflict-ridden

ambivalence. What is it that I want: justice or punishment for Vrisha? In case the child dies, I can atleast commit suicide. But will that act of mine mean saving the child? Can His Worship Sage Devadema think of putting my life into the child and thus saving him?

His Excellency was rendered a miserable wretch by such pervert thoughts chasing through him, and he felt like fleeing the palace. Will Shambarasura give me refuge?, he asked himself wordlessly. Or,will he also get angry with me for deserting his granddaughter and coming away?

The bed that the king was sleeping on seemed a bed of thorns, pricking him no end. He sprang up abruptly before mounting his horse and rushing to the royal physician's house.

Inside the royal physician's place was the scene of people weeping, sobbing and writhing in pain. The child's temperature had come down somewhat. The child had come to. That is the reason why the felt pain had aggravated, and the child was groaning and moaning. The parents were trying in vain to lull him to sleep."The temperature has come down." said the royal physician. Was this the only consolation, asked the king, a wordless poser to himself.

"There is no danger to the child's life, is there?" His Royal Majesty asked, as he took the physician out.

"I was also alarmed when I saw the temperature in the morning." the physician said evenly by way of a reply. "I made him drink the *sutashekhara* medicine. Now with the temperature coming down, he has been sweating!"

"What about tomorrow?"

"The temperature may come down tomorrow as well."

"Will the temperature come down without going up?"

"I didn't mean that. I have prayed to goddess Vasanthika Devi.Tomorrow is new moon day. Only She should take care of him."

We have a villager with us. He says he has herbs that will heal the wound and make new skin grow. But he is a villager."

"Are there precedent examples of such a thing happening."

"He has six scars of such wounds. He says only his herbs healed his wounds."

"What are those herbs?"

"He doesn't divulge the names."

"Sometimes villagers do know such herbs."

"Do you have any objection to using these herbs on the child?"

"What kind of an objection, Your Excellency!?" said the physician in order to escape from his responsibility, frightened as he was by the prospect of His Majesty visiting his abode every now and then. " Do you think an old man like me wouldn't be happy with the prospect of the child getting well and getting back to playing and frolicking?"

"In case his herbs don't cure, will you start you treatment over again?"

"Oh Yes, by all means! It would take atleast one month for our medicines to cure him. To say no to someone who says he can cure in four days would be morally incorrect. An arrogant doctor is the most wicked person. Healing is the essence of the medical science, isn't it?"

Without turning to look at the child, His Excellency got on his horse and left in search of Chitta.

A proclaimer crossed the king's path, and he was tomtomimg the following: 'Listen, folks! The child who came under the wheels of the king's chariot the other day hasn't died. He has had small wounds on his leg!' The main text that the king wanted proclaimed had been deleted. Vrisha's name didn't figure at all in this proclamation. The impression one got was that His Excellency himself ran the chariot over the child. In a way it was good that the low vulgar words had been elided. But that Vrisha's name didn't figure created room for a wrong perception of the situation. Trasadasyu called the proclaimer, and buttonholing him, asked: "On how many lanes have you cried this announcement?"

"On seven lanes."

"Your announcement is wrong. You have to proclaim as follows from now on: 'The boy who died after the king's chariot driven by Vrisha Bhatta ran over him hasn't died.'

"Your Excellency!"

Trasadasyu waited around for a while to see if the crier would proclaim things the way he wanted. He heard the sentence stop midway. Realising the mistake in his sentence, the king said, "I will say it again, listen!: "The child." "

"The child."

"who came under the wheels of the king's chariot"

"Who came under the wheels of the king's chariot"

"when Vrisha Bhatta was driving it"

"when Vrisha Bhatta was driving it"

"hasn't died!"

"hasn't died!"

"Now say the full text."

The crier said the full text upon which Trasadasyu

commanded, "You proclaim the same again on the lanes ahead." Trasadasyu then proceeded in his quest of Chitta. He had the satisfaction of correcting the text to be tomtommed.

It went to the proclaimer's credit not to have mentioned the swellings. The reason why Vrisha's name figured in a simple way was to correct the misperception about His Excellency. In a word a task had been accomplished in a perfect manner.

As His Excellency went a few steps the thought of why this crazy thing came out of his mouth plagued him. Did he desire unconsciously that the child should die? The moment this thought crossed his mind, he jabbered the following mantra from the upanishads for cleansing his unconscious mind*:

bhadram karniimhihi shruNuyaama deevaha
bhadram pashyeemaakshabhiryajatraaha
sthirairangaihi stustuvaam sastanuubhihi
rvyasheema deevahitam yadaayuhu

(O gods! may we hear auspicious words with our ears; while engaged in sacrifices, may we see auspicious sights with our eyes;while praising the gods with our steady limbs, may we enjoy a life that is beneficial to the gods.)

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* The Vedas and the Upanishads are underpinned by the psychology of the mind. Even the concept of 'sin-moral merit' that occurs in the later 'karmakanda' is based on psychology. At the time of commentaries and interpretations when tarka, nyaya and mimamsa disciplines began to seek the truth guided by linguistic analysis sidelining the science of the mind, the science of the mind fell behind. Meaning, etymology and grammar pushed the science of the mind behind. Jagadguru Shankaracharya's vital contribution is that he trained our attention again on the imagination of the self which is the basis of the science of the mind.

As he uttered the mantra twice, the virtuous pure-of-heart part of his personality awakened and he understood the meaning of what he harboured in his mind. 'No', he said to himself wordlessly. 'it wasn't a mistake made without any purpose.What should I have said then?' 'The news that the child died coming under the wheels of the king's chariot which Vrisha spread is false!' As soon as the awakened mind realized this, the passionate, less virtuous, less noble part of his personality surfaced. 'The crier is nearby. I should add this in the text to be proclaimed.' Sitting on his stationary horse, His Excellency mulled over the construction of the sentence so that the intended gist, the essential meaning would be clear to the proclaimer:

'The report that a boy died trapped under the wheels of His Excellency's chariot when the chariot was being driven by Vrisha Bhatta is baseless. The boy is injured in the leg. He will recover in a few days.'

The more he thought about this sentence, the more His Excellency felt that although it would be difficult to proclaim it, it expressed most objectively and impartially his opinion. When an inquiry takes place in the future, he told himself in an inner monologue, the proclamation should not appear to be partial. It should be as if the impartial announcement of the events should show his sense of justice and fairplay. He rushed toward the crier and told him the newly constructed sentence. He got it uttered to himself twice before he stood ready to leave, turning the horse in the direction he wanted to go.

The crier had announced the text twice in the lane he was now standing on. He went back again to the beginning of the lane before tomtomming the revised text. Trasadasyu

listened to it calmly, and feeling satisfied, went off toward the palace.

"Did Chitta come?" he asked the watchman.

"Yes, he has, Your Highness! He has gone home. Shall I go and bring him?"

"I will go myself."

There was a huge guesthouse named 'Kasya mandira' on the right as you walked from the palace. There were six houses behind it. One of them was Chitta's house. Trasadasyu didn't remember which one. He should have, he thought, brought along the servant. It was a mistake to have forgotten about Chitta's house in the hurry to get to his house.

There were a few children playing blithely there. They didn't notice the horseman who had arrived in their midst. It was usual for hundreds of horsemen to come there.

"Children! A man called Chitta has come here newly. Could you show me his house?"

"Oh Your Excellency!" a child who identified the king shouted, excited exuberance peeping out of his voice. Everyone became still like a stock. They took along the king with great honour and stood him before the second house.

The king entered the house without any fuss. Chitta was in the backyard, preparing his medicinal material having just brought the stone mortar. Having washed it Kleo Rani was rubbing it dry with a *panche*, the male wrap-around. Closeby there were herbs bundled up in an overcloth, the *uttariya*. In a bowl thereabouts was a red water-like solution.

"Hasn't your medicine been prepared as yet?" asked the king, surprise marking his voice.

"There was no delay in getting the herbs, my Great Lord!" Chitta answered. "I thought of grinding the herbs in cow urine since the blood could have coagulated because the physician washed the wound in water. The huge cowpen is not very far from here. The cows had already urinated. I waited for another bovine release of urine, standing around with the vessel by the raised stone structure. A cow at the far end relieved herself of urine. Crossing so many heads of cattle on my way to that cow and collecting her urine took time."

"Cowurine or whatever, prepare your medicine fast. The boy's temperature has come down now. The doctor had given him the *sutasekhara* tablet last night, it seems"

"Grinding will take atleast about an hour and a half. To my good fortune, Kleo Rani has borrowed and brought the stone mortar and a grinding stone from the neighbours."

In a show of bashfulness at her husband's appreciation of her gesture, Kleo Rani craned her neck back, one leg behind the other.

This was an important development. In her native Kanyakubja woods, Kleo didn't know what bashfulness was. She used to put her chest out and talk in a stiff masculine kind of voice. The king liked the subtle changes that had come about in such a girl. Standing before the mirror, Kleo had practiced the bashful behaviour that the civilized Ayodhye girls used to display. Although it seemed like unnatural body movement for her, she had got used to it in a few months.

"That is no big task. I asked for it, and they gave it. All I did was to carry it home."

"That the idea struck you is important," said the king.

Kleo bent further. The king himself had to feel bashful now.

Trasadasyu bent down and felt the bundle. "You said these are herbs. It feels like cowdung."

"Yes. The village heads said they were herbs. I selected only old leaves."

The king looked at the walls. There were cobwebs hanging in the corners. "Did your father Shambarasura live here, Kleo rani?"

"We had swept the house then. We have grown lazy now," replied Chitta.

"It seems you didn't smear the walls with lime wash etc. Let your work be over. I will have the house done up with paint etc. Your medicine should be ready in about two hours. I will bring the chariot" Saying this, Trasadasyu left for the palace, and reaching it, had his bath and meal.

There were two kinds of leaves, each kind numbering thirteen. Pouring cowurine on them, Chitta and Kleo Rani ground them and grinding for a considerable while they brought the leaves to some proper tempered state. They wrapped the lump in a castor leaf and heated it for a short while in clarified butter. When it was still fresh and hot, Chitta came running with it to the palace. The king was sitting ready. "Have you had your meal?" asked the king. "One who wraps it should wrap it on an empty stomach," replied Chitta. The twosome got on the chariot and came to the royal physician.

Wrapping his *peta* around his head, the royal physician had left his house the moment he heard that the two had left the palace. He wanted to escape responsibility.

As soon as the king entered the house he sent the parents out. The boy's forehead was burning with high

temperature. The king signalled to Chitta upon which Chitta touched the forehead. The fever was on the ascendant. "Nothing to worry" assured Chitta before he put a sedative tablet in the boy's mouth and had him drink some lukewarm water. The child went to sleep soon after. Chitta touched his limbs to make sure the child had gone fully unconscious. He then took out a knife from his pocket, and by whittling off the coagulated parts made blood flow. After sufficient blood had flowed out, Chitta pasted the lump he had prepared on to the wound before the blood clotted again, and pasting it layer on layer got it into some shape. He then placed two betel leaves on it, put the castor leaf dripping with clarified butter that he had brought before softly tying up a long strip several rounds on the wound.

The child heaved a relieved sigh.

"The blood pressure that had gone up in the head seems to have come down. We need a high pillow below his leg so that the medicine gets into the blood."

The king pointed to the pillow that lay thereabouts. Chitta brought it and put the child's leg on it.

"The child will come to in about an hour. His parents are here to see that he doesn't take off the bandage. Our work here is over for now. I will come again tomorrow morning to see him." said Chitta.

His Majesty called the parents inside and gave them appropriate suggestions. He had them sit right there. He sent Chitta off for his meal.

The parents were delighted to see the child sleeping peacefully. They applauded and extolled the king for taking personal interest in treating the kid. The king just sat listening to their words of praise. He was not yet confident

that the child would recover. He thought the child was sleeping because of the sedative medicine given. Suddenly as if he waking from a slumber, a train of thoughts set in motion in the king about the structure of his plans.

"Do you want to prefer a complaint about the incident? You decide yourself. I won't say anything. If you want you can formally complain," he said to the parents.

"Who should we complain against, My Lord? Against the king who did so much for us?"

"It was Vrisha Bhatta who'd held the reins then. Not me."

"That we didn't see. All we know is that it was His Exellency's chariot. Our Gajanana is a very mischievous boy. He slid out of my hands and ran in front of the speeding chariot. It was his mistake. Or it was I who let go of his hand, so the mistake was perhaps mine." said the father.

"Vrisha Bhatta doesn't know how to handle reins. Insisting on holding the reins he grabbed them," Trasadasyu submitted.

"What kind of a man is the Bhatta who doesn't know anything about driving chariots? What perversion had got into him that he wrenched the reins from your hands?" said the wife fiercely, diving into the conversation.

"That is my question too," the king chimed in. "What was the need to taunt, scoff and revile me before grabbing the reins? The regular driver would be familiar with the horse. The horse would be used to the way he pulls at the reins. How did the man who doesn't know anything about reins drum up the courage to drive the chariot on a crowded street in the evening? I don't see anything amusing in it."

"It is clear as daylight that it was a mistake. We didn't know that the reins were in his hands. This Brahmin is one

who would wring the life out of one." the father added, endorsing the king's observation.

"That is the concern of the citizens. I leave that to you. I would feel worthwhile having done this if your child recovers," said Trasadasyu insisting on his neutral arbitrating role.

The physician arrived in the meanwhile. "Has the herbal medicine been wrapped around the wound?" he asked.

"He is still under the spell of sleep. Our villager has tied up the herb. He has laid the leg on the pillow so its juices mingle in the blood."

The father asked the physician for a piece of paper. He wrote out a complaint as the king had suggested.

At about 6 o'clock in the evening on the fifth day of the month of Aashviina vadya of this epoch, the royal chariot driven by Vrisha Bhatta came veering toward the right side of the road and ran over the left heel of Gajanana Simhikendra, my third son aged nine and belonging to the caste of Yajurvedi brahmins, to the gotra of Atri and who has had his thread-investing ceremony. The said heel got injured and His Excellency who was in the above-mentioned chariot laid him down in the chariot, took me and wife along to the royal physician's abode and had him treated right in front of himself. We have heard that Sri Vrisha Bhatta didn't know how to drive a chariot. Such people driving the chariot on crowded streets in the evenings would be a mistake. This is a complaint seeking an inquiry about this incident.

dated signed

Below was the king's statement as a witness, which said, "I vouch with all my heart and soul that the above

mentoned complaint is true."

dated signed

Having signed his statement as a witness, the king doodled below that a judicial inquiry should be held, gave it to the police officer himself before leaving for the royal abode.

In the next eight days, the child began to develop new skin on his injured leg.

A letter written by Vrisha Bhatta went to the chairman of the judicial enquiry committee in the next fifteen days. The letter was rather long. The long and short of it was the following:

1. The king had a prejudiced eye on the Rigvedi Brahmins right from the days of Her Excellency. This complaint issues right out of that.

2. No judicial enquiry committee can hand out justice on any complaint in which the king himself is a witness. We are not therefore bound by it morally or legally.

3. It was the king himself who insisted that Sri Vrisha Bhatta took up the reins. It is not clear why he did it. He handed over the reins just for a minute even though he knew that Sri Vrisha Bhatta didn't know driving.

4. The king can drive the chariot wearing a blindfold. Whose is the mistake when such a man hands over the reins to let the chariot speed over the child? The citizens should understand this. That Sri Vrisha Bhatta is not bound by the judgement of any judicial inquiry has been made clear.

5. Many citizens have seen the reins in the king's hands. Only for an interim minute were they in Sri Vrisha Bhatta's hands. The accident didn't take place then. It came about when the king took up the reins. Sri Vrisha Bhatta doesn't however make this accusation. It is only a counter to the charge made against Sri Vrisha Bhatta.

6. It has been reported that His Excellency himself got this written by Simhikendra. This will be proved with witnesses in the proper judicial forum

7. The report has no substance. Sri vrisha Bhatta is innocent. This is a charge framed with malicious intent, and done at somebody's instance.

8. Sri Vrisha Bhatta hereby rejects all Ayodhye courts. If somebody is brought to Ayodhye from outside as the arbiting judge to enquire into this charge, Sri Vrisha Bhatta will present his arguments before him.

9. If, abusing one's position, the charge against Sri Vrisha Bhatta is brought before any Ayodhye court, thus forcing Sri Vrisha Bhatta into the court, Sri Vrisha Bhatta will assume total silence in protest. The responsibility for such an eventuality rests with the government. Sri Vrisha Bhatta will have the right to expose the methods of the Ayodhye government to do injustice to the Rigvedi Brahmins by making unfair use of the judiciary.

10. Sri Vrisha Bhatta held the office of the royal priesthood for two years. He has just been ejected from it. Although this is apparently not related to the accident in question, it is attached securely to it.

This is a counterargument written by Sri Vrisha Bhatta

signed dated

A copy of this counter reached Trasadasyu's hands.

Trasadasyu hotted up. Stewing in a boiling cauldron of crashing conflicting emotions, he was completely at a loss as to what he ought to do at the moment.

Neither his mother nor Tarkshya was by him. He sent for the premier.

The premier was stunned by the counteraccusatory letter. "This means that no judge in Ayodhye is competent

to pronounce judgements against Vrisha Bhatta. I haven't seen in my whole lifetime somebody saying anything like this! I will inquire and telll you." said the premier, and was on the point of walking away with the letter when Trasadasyu grabbed it, saying, "Let it be here." Affronted, the premier went off without saying anything in response.

Trasadasyu walked to his room with the letter. His head was empty, bereft of any thoughts.

He then walked to the royal court hall and sat there. Even the few thoughts he did have vanished into thin air there.

He came into the garden. No idea struck him even there.

This is a magical letter, he said to himself wordlessly, put it into the chest with shivering hands before he walked back to the royal room and went to sleep.

People have ditched me. What if his thoughts ditched him too? Trasadasyu asked himself getting into a wordless monologue. The child recovered. His delighted parents took him home. If you go by the letter, Vrisha also has friends, supporters and advisors.

As for me I am an orphan. My brain has gone inactive, much like the tortoise that finds itself in boiling water.

His was the loneliness of the ocean bottom. The helplessness of the graveyard. The voidlessness holed up in the void.

Trasadasyu dropped off.

Night fell.

Queen Padmavati came and embraced him.

Trasadasyu didn't want even her. He pushed her away and went to sleep.

She moved away, as if driven by an order.

Trasadasyu-3

Tarkshya came the next day.

His Excellency felt a mite of comfort.

Even as he lay on the bed, he chucked the treasury chest keys toward him as he said, "Vrisha's reply is there in the vault. You take and read it!"

Tarkshya did as the king bid.

"This is exactly what I expected. What has happened is what should in fact have happened. That's all." he said.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"I did. Even Her Excellency told you. In fact she went a step further and warned you, "Face the court as the plaintiff, not as a witness" Didn't she? You didn't get its meaning then it appears."

"What is its meaning?"

"This problem would have cropped up tomorrow, if not today. Your area is the *panchayat* of Ayodhye. Considering the crime, only foreign nationals should arbitrate it. Both of us expected that the question of domestic courts would come up. You always thought of standing as a witness in this court. You can function as a plaintiff more ably in front of an outsider judge. If you stand as a witness, scholars in the open meeting would maul you. Her Excellency didn't want to see that scene. She went off to Amaru."

"Is my mother that clever?"

"What shall I say, Your Excellency? I formulate today's duty after thinking about the probable events that could take place after the next ten days. Sitting at home,

Her Majesty devises today plans for the next ten years. How could a small country like Ayodhye become the political center of the *Aryavarta* empire otherwise, fighting against brave and valiant people?"

"What should we do now?"

"If one looks at this letter, it is difficult either to stay silent or to do something. We are caught in a cleft stick. There is no other way. Call outsiders."

"Couldn't you do anything before that?"

"Your Excellency! I am Tarkshya. I could have done something before the complaint was preferred. I feel as if my hands are tied now."

"What could have been done then?"

"We could have made both Vrisha Bhatta and Bhima Bhatta flee Ayodhye either because of greed or fear."

"What is the apprehension now?"

"I can't make them flee now. Vrisha Bhatta won't leave. If you look at the letter, you will realise that it is a reply written by ten scholars putting their heads together. There must have been sufficient publicizing. Public reproach is scary for the king."

"All right. Which outsiders should be called?"

"The Kashi king is our close friend."

"All right. You take the responsibility of getting him here and delivering a judicious judgement."

"All right, Your Excellency! I will get the invitation written by the mayor and take it to Kashi. You also write a letter. I will come and take both the letters."

"Why both?"

"Your letter for the hospitality of the guest. The judge's is for the judicial enquiry."

Trasadasyu's heart skipped a beat as he realized that the judiciary was independent and that he had no control over it!

He took a reed-pen and constructed his letter. He didn't advisedly mention the work of the judiciary in it.

Tarkshya got on a horse and rode to Virabhadra Trisanu, the Mayor. "Did you see Vrisha Bhatta's letter?" he asked.

Trisanu was heartened. "He has no respect for the judiciary in Ayodhye. Let him suffer!"

"What does that mean?"

"Imprisonment. What else?"

"For how many days?"

"A couple of months. We should look up the books of standard authority and decide."

"Would that mean that justice is done?"

"No, it wouldn't."

"Could you talk and see?"

"What is there to talk in this? This man is deeply conversant with the Vedas, it seems. It is stupid to let him stay in the city. The king did him a favour by appointing him as the royal priest because he was his childhood friend. He has repaid that help!"

"But what about the judicial inquiry?"

"We would know about it once it gets going."

"He says he won't give any statements in any Ayodhye court."

"I will maul him. Let him come before me."

"His accusation is that the complaint against him came just to wreak vengeance on Rigvedi Brahmins. Isn't the

resolution of this accusation possible?"

"Look Tarkshya! The Rigvedi Brahmins of this city should be branded with a red-hot iron rod. Only then will they come on track."

"Wouldn't that be a blot on His Excellency's sense of justice and fairplay?"

"Is this justice done to him? In which town are you living?" Then the mayor looked this way and that before saying," They are spreading the news now that His Excellency is not Purukutsa's son. Things being the way they are, to afford justice to them is like feeding a snake with milk."

Tarkshya was surprised. "How did you come to know?" he asked.

"Vrisha Bhatta himself came to give the letter. He called me aside, as he was going out, to tell me this."

It was only then that Tarkshya got wise to the grimness of the situation. It suddenly came home to him that the whole royal family was sitting right on top of a volcano. What is the counter to a whispered smear-campaign?, he put the question to himself.

Tarkshya arrived at a decision all at once.

"Pardon me, Trisanu! Don't think otherwise. Don't get angry with the king. He is simple and pure of heart. He thinks that he stands before the world, subject to the rules of justice. There is no other way. He is worried seeing Vrisha's letter. He is seriously mulling over a possible way out. It is beyond me to deliver him of this madness."

"What is the way out?"

"The way out is to invite the Kashi king for the judicial inquiry."

"These are the ways of an immature boyish mind. What could I do if that is what he wishes? What kind of a man is the Kashi king?"

"He was schooled in jurisprudence and Vedanta right in his childhood. He is also a scholar of the code of Hindu law and jurisprudence. He is a ruthlessly objective judge. He is quite young, but is quite a scholar. He has outwitted scholars in Kashi."

"Does he have the ability to face Bhima Bhatta and Vrisha Bhatta?"

"They are hardly a patch upon him."

"In that case tell His Majesty and get the Kashi king."

"His Excellency will arrange hospitality. The invitation to the judicial inquiry should go out from you, the judge."

"All right. I will have a letter written."

"There is something to be done even before that. We have to tomtom this through the length and breadth of the town, intimating this to the population. Let them know the Kashi king's scholarship and see if there is any objection from anyone to the appointment of the Kashi supremo for this job."

"Why should we do that?"

"That way you will have shouldered your responsibility. We will also have proclaimed to the world the sense of justice and fairplay of the chief justice of Ayodhye."

Tarkshya's purpose however was different.

His idea was that in case Vrisha Bhatta agreed to this, Vrisha Bhatta would have fettered up his own hands.

Trisanu was lost in thought for a while. He jumped up suddenly, as if from a coiled spring. He hugged Tarkshya

tight before saying, " Wonderful! You have spoken words as precious as pearls. In case we are to give this statement ourselves, we would have saved our honour and that of Ayodhye equally well. Vrisha's obstinacy would also that way have had its run. You decide and write what should be written and what should be tomtommed? I will sign it."

Tarkshya prepared a single text for the plaintiff, the respondent and the proclaimer.

Because Simhikendra preferred a complaint about the chariot driven by Vrisha Bhatta moving over his son Gajanana and thereby his son getting injured....

Because Vrisha Bhatta expressed his doubts about being handed out justice in an Ayodhye court....

the order that I, the Mayor, Justice Virabhadra Trisanu, issue is

that, to administer justice in this case, I have determined to invite, the Sage King, the King of Kings, King Ketumanta who is the king of Kashi, who is a scholar in the Vedas, who is conversant in matters having to do with justice and who is a Rigvedi Kshatriya, belonging to Kashyapa *gotra*.

In case either the plaintiff or the respondent or any other citizen of Ayodhye has any reservations, apprehensions or distaste about this decision, such citizens should come to the court, sound the bell and personally hand over their applications to the aforementioned Mayor Justice Trisanu.

In case no such letters or supplications are received, it will be assumed that all Ayodhye citizens have agreed to this decision. An invitation to come over to Ayodhye and administer justice will be sent out to the sage-king Ketumanta. The king will be invited to stay in Ayodhye for three months, or for six months if three are not enough, or

one year if six months are not enough. To meet his living expenses Trisanu will draw a thousand *varahas* from the judicial Trust fund, five hundred *varahas* from the state treasury and collect fifty *varahas* each from the plaintiff and the respondent. Trisanu will organize the visiting dignitary's accomodation in the Amrita Mandira, which is on the outskirts of the city.

The Ayodhye scholars could invite King Ketumanta over for discussions, expositions and lectures on matters of righteous demeanour and obligatory moral duty. But nothing of the judicial inquiry should be discussed in such meetings. Once the matter has come up for judicial inquiry, there is no room for snide references, for rumours floating in the air and for unnecessary criticisms. Trisanu desires that citizens display their virtuous righteous nature.

* * * *

Trisanu had the wording of the text done by Tarkshya read twice. "Your wording is very good." he said. "But the issue that I raised hasn't come up in it."

"Which issue?"

"The issue of the culpable offence that Vrisha Bhatta has done to the seat of justice of Ayodhye hasn't come up in your text. That should also be added."

"Fine! Would it be all right if it is added at the end?"

"You write. We will see."

"Even though words like 'smear campaign', 'rejection' and 'disregard' that Vrisha Bhatta used about the judiciary of Ayodhye are objectionable and culpable, an inquiry into this will be deferred till a judgement about the main inquiry is delivered. This decision has been taken keeping in view Vrisha Bhatta's scholarship and the fact that he was till recently the royal priest. Atleast after I as the Chief Justice of Ayodhye

hand this dispute over to the arbitrating king of Kashi, Ayodhye citizens shouldn't think Vrisha Bhatta's behaviour is an affront to Ayodhye. I hereby appeal to the citizens of Ayodhye that till the dispute is settled they should treat Vrisha Bhatta as any ordinary citizen of Ayodhye."

Tarkshya showed this to Trisanu. "Wow!" exclaimed the king. "Our document is complete now! Now you write its summary so as to facilitate the proclaimer's job."

Tarkshya wrote out the different issues and handed them over to the king. He then saw that the full text was available to the plaintiff and the respondent, to the king, on the display board of the community hall, and at some strategic places at the market place. Then marking the places at which the crier could tomtom the text, Tarkshya left for the palace.

He told the king everything before informing him that his trip to Kashi had been deferred by three days.

TRASADASYU-4

There was an objection from Vrisha Bhatta right on the first day. The objection was that the period of three days was not enough. Atleast a week was necessary to raise objections to the Chief Justice's order.

The Chief Justice didn't however agree to this. He held that once a decision was taken, it was his duty to stick by it.

Then Vrisha Bhatta raised an objection about the fifty *varahas*.

"You were a royal priest," said the Chief justice to Vrisha Bhatta. "I will use money from your Trust funds judiciously. If there remains anything in the Trust funds, you will duly get it..."

"Once the judgment about the main dispute is out, it wouldn't be proper on the Chief Justice's part to raise the issue of the offence of maligning the seat of justice." countered Vrisha Bhatta.

"It was you who brought us documentary evidence about the insult done by you to the Ayodhye seat of justice, wasn't it?" averred the Chief Justice.

"There is no word there about a smear compaign." Vrisha returned.

"We will enquire into it in the court. We will give a judgement in your favour if as you say there is no maligning in your representation. If the maligning is proved you will be sent to jail. That is it."

"How many days in the prison?"

"We will examine it meticulously and decide the

period according to your scholarship and position," said Trisanu.

"What is the approximate period of imprisonment?"

"One month to six months only."

"The Ayodhye king is a Kshatriya and so is the Kashi king. What is the guarantee that justice will be meted out?"

"What if the Yajurvedi plaintiff argues that you are a Rigvedi and the Kashi king is a Rigvedi? What would you say?"

"What if we prove that the king has no right to sit on the throne?"

"That will be the subject of another dispute. That has nothing to do with this case."

"It is an open secret that the Kashi king came to power because of Her Excellency's wicked design."

"The Kashi king ascended the throne because he was the son of the Kashi king. Kings die in wars and their sons ascend the throne. There is no question here of a wicked design."

"The Kashi king came to power because he was his father's son. What about our king?"

"Because he was King Purukutsa's son."

"That's how it is, is it? I will see." shot back Vrisha, incensed before leaving, twirling his moustache.

* * * *

When His Excellency went lounging through the city in his chariot that evening, a contingent of brats stood staring at him in a lane of the Brahmin neighbourhood. "He is Simha Bhatta's son, he has ascended the seat of Purukutsa, fellow!" shouted one of them before running away.

In another lane stood six small girls. Innocent

dewy-eyed girls. One of them asked the king: "Your Excellency! Will it be a younger brother or younger sister that is going to be born to you?"

In another lane stood Vrisha Bhatta's wife herself. As the chariot passed their house, she remarked, "Purukutsani's bugbear!" before disappearing into the house.

The king got back to the palace, downcast.

In a way it is true that the three-day period that Tarkshya had given Vrisha stuck Vrisha in a slushy bog.

But three days were enough for people like Simha Bhatta or Vrisha Bhatta to trouble and alarm the family.

What the king was convinced about was that a small group of Vrisha-admirers was hell-bent on harassing and affronting him.

On purpose Tarkshya didn't do anything for the next three days to monitor the king's movements. But he appointed Veerasena to find out how many people there were, doing this and who these people were and to gauge them. There were thirty such people, who were determined to humiliate the king publicly. There were thirty people who indulged in a smear-campaign in the name of a serious discussion and who believed it to some extent. Most among them were Rigvedi Brahmins. It came to be known that the royal priest was one among them.

Tarkshya took the king's and the mayor's invitation to Kashi. By the time he returned, the smear-compaign had subsided as Trisanu said it would.

The crescendo of the mud-slinging offensive came to a head on the third day. On that day a smiling Vrisha Bhatta came to the bursar's office at around 2 o'clock in the morning along with ten Rigvedis.

"We need a detailed account," boomed the treasurer right in front of his subordinate staff. "of the contingency expenses of annual allowance, festive gifts and presents etc that have been handed to Simha Bhatta and his family from the state treasury."

"Who are you to ask us about that?"

"I am the former royal priest. I gave up the post a month back of my own accord. But I haven't submitted the final accounts of the post. I have to do it when I hand over charge to the incoming priest. This is royal duty. Give me the detailed statement of accounts."

"How long were you the royal priest?"

"Two years."

"I will hand over the accounts of these two years to the incoming priest, not to you."

"This is royal work. Any irregularity would be a big offence. I will have to complain against you."

"Do complain by all means. You owe the royal treasury hundred and twelve *varahas*. You either submit an account of it or hand over the money. If you don't do either, your house will be searched."

"Listen! You people, listen! You people are witness. It seems they will search the house of the very people who have come to ask for the accounts of the Ayodhye administration."

"Hoo!" shouted the few people who had come. They shouted slogans against it. The guardsmen stopped them on their way out.

"The judge has given us three days to vent our grievances. This is the third day. We will go to the judge now to tell him our anxieties, give way."

"You can't shout here." shouted the security chief. "This is an office. We will let you if you leave quietly. Or else we will push you into the cellar."

"Let them go, Yajnavarma!" boomed the treasurer. "Why do you bother about what they do?"

"I will do my work. You may do yours." said Yajnavarma to the treasurer.

Vrisha Bhatta felt a mite of satisfaction because cracks were there to be seen even in the administrative machinery.

"All right! Let the police officer and the treasurer bicker. Let's go!"

What was undeniable in sum was that Trasadasyu's kingdom had begun to disintegrate at various levels. Clefts were clearly and at once visible between castes, between men and women, between occupational groups. Even between individuals, and between officers.

Tarkshya who had gone to Kashi went there circumspectly, in a disguise, because he feared just in case some former army officers recognized him as the man who killed the former Kashi king, forget about his writ running there, he might not even get a disdainful yes to the invitation. He said his name was Veerasena and that he had brought a letter from the king of Ayodhye and the Chief Justice.

The Kashi king was surprised. "I don't quite understand," he said. "An invitation to resolve a small dispute? King Trasadasyu hasn't even mentioned it."

"There is a reason for it, Your Majesty!" replied Tarkshya. "Hiṣ Excellency is a witness to this dispute. He will give his statement as a witness at the time of the trial. Respondent Vrisha Bhatta submitted an application to Justice Trisanu saying "No judge from Ayodhye can give

me justice when His Excellency himself is standing as witness against me." "The Kashi king is deeply conversant with matters of justice and jurisprudence. Will you agree atleast to his judgement?" returned His Excellency. All people concerned - the plaintiff, the respondent and the general public - have agreed to this arrangement with alacrity. There is nobody who understands the subtelties of justice better than you. Our king will not jib at telling the truth as a witness before you. Only you should free us from this dilemma.'

"The invitation is for three months. Who will steer the ship of the state for that long?"

"True, Your Majesty! But this is a challenge to your sense of justice and righteousness. If you take up this challenge, your fame will spread through the length and breadth of the Aryavarta empire. Besides, your impartial sense of justice and fairplay will unfold and display. One more thing," stammered Tarkshya.

"Tell me! Don't hesitate."

"I am putting some things before you with some real hesitation. This is however outside my brief."

The others in the meeting walked out at the Kashi king's signal.

Tarkshya broached the following to the king as if he was divulging some secrets:

1. Having been insulted by Vrisha Bhatta's apprehension, Justice Trisanu is distressed. Many names were suggested to him. He has agreed to your name with great respect because he thinks that the Kashi king is better than himself. If you decline, we will be in a spot.

2. The Ayodhye scholars are full of their own importance. His Excellency has sent you a personal request to come over here and during your stay of three months show the Ayodhye people what real scholarship is by giving lectures, seminars and holding discussions.

3. His Excellency recognises all the four Vedas. According primacy only to Rigvêda, a small group among the Rigvedi brahmins have rejected the other Vedas and thus incurred the Brahmins' rejection. We want you to take Ayodhye forward by letting them know your impartial ways.

4. Our His Excellency is inspired precisely by your sense of what is morally right and what is wrong. But he is simple and pure of heart. We shouldn't let Vrisha Bhatta's people to affront His Majesty in the open court. They are already ready to do it. Our king has extended this invitation to you with a clean heart and with the purpose of securing justice. Sri Vrisha is likely to raise irrelevant issues in the court of law to leverage this agreement between you and Ayodhye by overlooking the purpose of inviting you. The mayor is worried about this possibility.

5. There is a request to you from the ruling king of Ayodhye to come over to Ayodhye as his guest. But your accomodation has been arranged in Amrit Mahal, which is outside the city. His Excellency will come over himself a couple times to enquire about you. But he is hesitant to come over more often and be with you talking and dining with you because he is a witness himself. He has requested you not to take this amiss.

The Kashi king understood the subtlety of the situation.

"It is good that you told me these things right here. I will come to Ayodhye on the fifth day of the bright fortnight of the month of Margashirsha. The trial should begin within three days of my arrival. I will finish the trial in fifteen days if possible. The trial will take place between two and five in the morning. I won't take any food before the trial. I will take some fruit and some cow-milk. That's all. Thereafter I will take my meal and some rest, and study the trial proceedings of the day in the next two hours. You may organise whatever theoretical discussion sessions and religious discourses in the evening you want. I will not take any nonvegetarian food till the trial is over, and a judgement pronounced. Tell Mr Trisanu to organise things this way."

Mounting his horse, Tarkshya left Kashi that very night and reached Ayodhye the following morning.

He met Trisanu and told him about the Kashi king's programme and the stipulations that will govern it. "His Excellency is disturbed, be careful!" warned Trisanu after he told Tarkshya about the miscampaigning that Vrisha indulged in in the last three days. Tarkshya saw the king and without affording the king any room to talk, he rattled off in one breath that the Kashi king would come on the fifth day in the fortnight of the waxing moon of the month of Margashirsha, that he would stay in Amrit Mahal, that His Excellency could see him but once or twice and that he had reservations about the king seeing him often during the time of the trial.

"All right, Fine! I was in fact waiting for you. Now that this is over, I will go to Amaru." said Trasadasyu.

Tarkshya was astonished by this new idea of Trasadasyu's.

"Wherever His Excellency is, the favourable blessings of His Holiness Devadema are always with His Excellency," commented Tarkshya, camouflaging his surprise. He wanted to find out the purpose of Trasadasyu's proposed visit to Amaru.

"Who is talking about Sage Devadema? I have to go to Amaru."

"I have a small garden in Amaru. I had asked people to plant pumpkin vines. If His Majesty vouchsafes me this, I would also like to come there to see about this. In any case you need a charioteer!"

"All right! But you have no reason to come to the ashram."

"I will spend just a few minutes getting His Worship's blessings before going on to Amaru."

"Okay. We will leave right away."

"I will bring the chariot."

Tarkshya had travelled the whole of the previous night on horseback, crossing three rivers. He itched for atleast two hours of opium-induced sleep. But when Tarkshya heard the king's voice he felt in his guts that an important event was round the corner and that he had a special responsibility in it. Loyalty to the king was second nature to Tarkshya. He didn't feel it was right to leave the king alone in Amaru. What about his fatigue?! There was no question of rest now. During his prime there were days when he worked for as long as eight days, day and night, without any rest at all. Now he has grown old. Yet would one more task make any difference?

He hitched four horses to the royal chariot and brought it immediately.

Trasadasyu got on the chariot on an as-was-where-was-condition, in the very clothes he had had on and without combing his dishevelled hair.

Cheesed off by the soliloquised asides and the indistinct little cries of 'm' from the king's mouth as the chariot crossed the capital's suburbs, Tarkshya breathed, a streak of politeness in his voice, "His Excellency seems immersed in some worrisome thought!"

"Worry? Is there a human without any worries?"

The dialogue ground to a halt there.

The chariot rolled past the suburbs and the outer limits of the city.

"Trasadasyu! I need half an hour's sleep." Tarkshya piped up, speaking from the vantage position of a teacher. "I didn't have a wink of sleep the whole of last night. Take up the reins. We will run into a vast bamboo grove. We have to skirt it from the right. We will then get past the Achhoda Lake after half an hour's drive. Wake me up then. Till then drive slowly and steadily so my sleep is not disturbed. Smart boy!"

"All right, *guru!*" exclaimed Trasadasyu even as he moved into Tarkshya's place and took up the reins.

"Growing old!" burbled Tarkshya as he moved behind into a corner, and taking out an opium pill and gulping it without letting Trasadasyu see it, lay down, his legs drawn upto his chest. After a while he stretched his legs on to Trasadasyu's lap for more comfort.

. Trasadasyu held the four reins in his left hand and started to stroke Tarkshya's legs with his right hand.

"Haa! You are my real disciple!" said Tarkshya. In the next minute his snores began to be heard. Trasadasyu

stopped stroking then to hold the reins in both his hands. He moved the chariot in a skilful slow pace, negotiating the pits, ups, and downs, stones etc on the way.

Tarkshya woke up on his own as the Achhoda Lake came by. "Now you can go back and rest." he offered, coming up and taking up the reins.

"O my Guru! May I ask for the pills in your pocket?"

Tarkshya was stunned by the smartness of his disciple that had exposed his sleight of hand

"Are there pills in my pocket?" he asked.

"Yes, there are. You took one. You woke up on your own after half an hour. I want four times that number: I need to sleep till I reach Amaru."

"A student who asks his teacher for opium pills is intelligent indeed!" smiled Tarkshya as he took out four pills from his pocket and held them in his fist. "I am giving them to you. You won't wake up till you reach Amaru. Before I do that, you answer my question. Why are you going to Amaru?"

"I am going there to understand who I am."

"That is a theoretical question. Only Sage Devadema can answer such questions. You will get only ambiguous answers from anyone else. There is no use believing them."

"I will ask only those who know."

"You are a fool, go sleep! May god give you good sense." So saying Tarkshya poured out the pills that had been hidden away near his ankle.

Trasadasyu swallowed all the four at one go before he went to sleep folding his legs and bringing them on to his chest.

TRASADASYU-5

Over here in Amaru...

Eight months had elapsed since Kripa Devi and Simha Bhatta came there.

Kripa Devi was suffering from joint pains.

Sage Devadema's treatment was on.

Simha Bhatta had in fact exacerbated his wife's illness in the one month he nursed her with great respect because he couldn't control his carnal craving.

They had now been put up in separate huts.

He had been appointed to look after the Naga boys as he had evinced signs of mental derangement.

Reports were received also from the boys' parents about Simha Bhatta's mental derangement. Sage Devadema started treating him as well.

Rendered sick and tired of it, the ascetic renunciate was now thinking of sending Simha Bhatta alone off to Ayodhye.

Kripadevi didn't however agree to this. "If go we have to, we will both go," she argued.

Simha Bhatta was assigned the task of making beds in the garden. But his moaning and groaning didn't cease.

At exactly this time Purukutsani, angry with her son, stepped into the ashram.

His absence was a forgotten thing in Ayodhye.

Simha Bhatta had begged her for the alms of love fifteen times in the fifteen days Purukutsani was there.

After declining five times, Purukutsani discussed it with Sage Devadema.

"What do we do? Simha Bhatta has got both old and crazy! It is difficult to send him to Ayodhye. Nor is it easy to keep him here." advised the sage. His Holiness also broached his sensual escapades, his peccadilloes, his poetry and his absurd lamentations as reported by Tarkshya.

Purukutsani asked after a little reflection, "Will he be mentally all right if I give in to his cravings?"

"He could be. Or it could aggravate as well. One can't say for sure in the affairs of the human mind."

"Could we give it a try?"

"That depends on your will power. I can't say anything. You could if you want take Kripadevi's permission. Speaking of Simha Bhatta, one could say he is gone mad. You will not get attracted to him. He has gone old, to boot. Think about it. An important point to keep in mind is that you are no longer the queen. This is a relationship of sexual lust. He has no authority on you. You could couple with him just out of sympathy. Your sole purpose should be to do away with his mental derangement."

The queen mulled over it for the next eight days.

The sage left the task of getting Kripadevi's permission to Simha Bhatta.

A discussion about this was on when Trasadasyu rushed in, pushing the door open. A glum-faced Kripadevi was sobbing. Purukutsani and the ascetic were seated beside her. In a corner was Simha Bhatta, standing and crying.

Trasadasyu, his eyes reddened and bleary because of the opium-induced sleep that he had just woken up from, parked himself right opposite the queen before shouting, a testy and gruff edge to his voice, "Whose son am I?"

Purukutsani as a matter of fact didn't quite hear this unexpected question initially.

"Come, sit!" welcomed the queen. But in those tense, serious moments she couldn't bring herself to give him a smiling welcome.

"I haven't come to sit" Trasadasyu shot back. "I want a straight answer. Whose son am I?"

Purukutsani suddenly stood up.

"What did you say?" she asked again.

"Whose son am I? I want a simple answer."

"You are the son of whosoever's name you become the heir to the throne by." Purukutsani returned stamping her foot.

"I want a simple answer."

"You are a son who doesn't even know the father's name. It is worth your while having been born!"

"Am I King Purukutsa's son?"

"Yes, you are. Why the doubt?"

"Some people in Ayodhye are saying I am this crazy Bhatta's son!" said Trasadasyu turning to look at Simha Bhatta.

"Some crazy Bhattas may be saying it. Do you believe it?"

"Vrisha Bhatta, they say, saw you and Simha Bhatta together naked!"

"What was Vrisha Bhatta's age then?"

"Four years," replied Trasadasyu before holding the dagger to Simha Bhatta's neck and asking him, "Tell me, whose son am I?"

Kripadevi let out a sudden scream.

Simha Bhatta's eyes had blanched. He sagged down to the ground.

His whitened and unseeing eyes whirled.

"All are god's children. Be careful! He is mad. She is ill. If either of them dies, you will have the blame of having killed a Brahmin." remarked the sage, his sage voice loud and authoritative.

Sheathing his sword, Trasadasyu deadpanned, "I don't want to kill Simha Bhatta. All I need is a simple answer." "I will say on oath" Vrisha Bhatta is saying, "whatever I saw with my own eyes in front of Goddess Vasanthikadevi." He is also saying I am not entitled to the throne. What do I say to that? I want a simple answer."

"I will give you the answer. You are Purukutsa's son, believe me!" said Sage Devadema.

Purukutsani rose abruptly. "Your Worship! My son is not in a position to listen to you. I will answer him myself: When I was born, my parents named me 'Purukutsani'. At the time of my marriage as my husband, King Purukutsa tied the marriage-badge round my neck, he named me 'Narmade'. Now I am Purukutsa's widow. I, who was once a queen, have made you the king, and have become an ordinary woman. From now on I am the prostitute of this crazy Brahmin until his madness wears off. You have come this far precisely to test this. So listen! I was up till now Purukutsa's wife. From now on I am this Brahmin's prostitute, do you understand?" So saying she stepped up in a strange frenzy and taking up Simha Bhatta who had collapsed, lay him down on her lap. "Kripadevi has in a big- hearted gesture accorded permission just now for this relationship. Ask her. You ascertain this and later sanctify this relationship by handing me vermilion and turmeric."

Kripadevi signalled her permission by nodding her head from just where she was seated.

Trasadasyu, bewildered and dismayed, looked around. Everyone stood like a doll. Trasadasyu felt the world was whirling around him. He was in fact about to fall down when Tarkshya ran up and held him. "Boy! Let's not fight with the queen." Tarkshya whispered in his ear. "Let's move from here. Our job is done here. We have to go to Ayodhye to welcome the Kashi king."

Sage Devadema brought a small round vessel of vermilion and turmeric powder from inside and held it before Trasadasyu. Seeing that Trasadasyu didn't lift his hand to take it, he jabbered with a solemn air the *mantra* of

Sarveshaamaviroodheena brahmakarma samarabhe

(I start the brahmakarma without anyone's opposition)

Recovering, Trasadasyu got up before he smeared Purukutsani's forehead with the vermilion-and-turmeric powder with shivering hands, and without quite knowing what he was doing.

With Tarkshya's help he walked out quietly and got on the chariot.

No one came upto the door to see him off.

Tarkshya had him eat eight pills before bringing him to Ayodhye.

Truths are always deep, Tarkshya said to himself wordlessly, lapsing into an inward debate. The witness is the individual's conscience. The man who pokes at someone else's truth is indeed a fool. Is my role in this agreeable to my conscience? I am in a way Trasadasyu's guru. Trasadasyu is the queen's son. Didn't I do so many royal jobs on my own, going beyond the ambit of the queen's instructions. Her Excellency used to identify the goals and I used my intelligence to execute them. I didn't however tell the queen how I implemented them. Now

when Trasadasyu became the king, why is it that I don't feel like assuming so much independence? What is the difference between the queen and Trasadasyu? Isn't it just the difference of gender? I took the liberty of calling Trasadasyu a 'fool'! What if I exercised the authority of his teacher and told him, "We should not go to Amaru today.", or give him the pretext of the day, date and the star, or adduce the pretext of some other royal work.? Trasadasyu is still immature. He is impetuous, doesn't know what snake is in store in which anthill. He thinks justice and truth are very simple things. He appoints people who are imprudent, indiscrete and nondiscriminating. Listens credulously to people and thus weaves a noose around his own neck. But he is a capable man. Look at my lot! Fearing such semi-competence and semi-intelligence, wanting to stick to the ideals of allegiance-to-the-master and royal honour, and instead of according the queen the honour due to her, committing myself to the immature judgements of this greenhorn, I have had to see the downfall of Ayodhye! Is fidelity to the master restricted to order implementation? Is it the devotion that I assumed toward Purukutsani? Purukutsani used to be five steps ahead of me. This boy is behind me by ten steps. My best option now, the most proper way for me to take is to question his decisions. Who and what should I be afraid of? I told the queen that I wanted to retire, didn't I? Didn't I continue to work because of her trust, a flaming fool!? I behaved much against my grain because the hint that Trasadasyu is a man was quite adequate. I should trust my own judgement from now on. I should see that the king agrees to my decision. The king's decisions brought dishonour to the royal seat of justice. The skill set that helped nab Shambarasura was indeed praiseworthy. But I

brought our seat of justice dishonour by quailing at a letter of this scum of a man, *chhi*! Fortunately Trisanu agreed. But is this fair? I should treat him as my disciple even in royal work! I should see that the Ayodhye royal family stabilizes because of him. That is my morally obligatory and prescribed duty.

Thinking such thoughts for a distance of eight *haradaris*, Tarkshya reached Ayodhye.

His Excellency hadn't yet gotten out of the spell of sleep. Tarkshya called four security personnel and ordered them to take the king and let him sleep on his bed.

"All right. About an hour's rest is enough!" he said to himself before going off to Chitta's place.

Chitta hadn't yet gotten home. He told Kleorani: "Two strangers will come and give you fifty *varahas* in the next hour and a half. You shouldn't ask who they are. As soon as Chitta comes, tell him to take the money to Simhikendra. Don't tell him who gave you this, nor that I saw you. Tell Chitta: 'This is the money that ought to reach the court of law. Somebody told me, somebody gave the money. A philanthropist of our street asked to give this to you.' "

He then went to the treasurer and telling him, "This is the account of my trip to Kashi", got eighty *varahas* in his name. Chatting with him he told him that he had asked Simha Bhatta for the account of the money that been paid to him for thirty years, and garnered the details of the conversation that the treasurer had with him then. Then he left for Veerasena's house. "You veil your face and go hand over fifty *varahas* to Kleo rani. She won't ask for your name. She shouldn't see your face." So saying he handed over a bundle of fifty *varahas* to Veerasena. He kept with himself thirty *varahas* as the expenditure of his trip to Kashi.

The bundle of fifty *varahas* reached Simhikendra's place that very night. Simhikendra had been worried about getting together such an amount. Simhikendra felt extremely grateful for the stranger's gesture. A report came the next day from Trisanu that the money had been deposited in the court.

Tarkshya visited the Vasanthika temple after a few days when tens of Rigvedis crowded round him before saying, "We are mobilising money for Vrisha Bhatta's judicial trust fund. You should donate whatever you can." They had in their hands a wooden box with a hole in it. They would shake the box and let the coins therein rattle before asking for donations from visitors to the temple.

Tarkshya sat with them. "How much have you collected so far?" he asked.

"We had eighteen *varahas* till yesterday evening. As for today we have had a few one-eighth *aane*" said one.

"We had determined that if people keep the one-eighth *aana* coins in front of the goddess, they could put the one-eighth *aana* coins in the box. We had ten *varahas* on the very first day. But people who heard about it have stopped coming to the temple. We had eight *varahas* in five days." joined another.

"Only those with money get justice in Ayodhye." shouted a third man.

"Why, won't you get the rest as a loan?" asked Tarkshya, glossing over it.

As one Brahmin looked at the other's face, a Khavisa Brahmin piped up: "We might. But Vrisha doesn't have the face to ask for a loan. He has incurred the enemity of all in the city. 'We will advance loans, but not to Vrisha.' said the Vaishya merchants. Insulted, Vrisha Bhatta opted for this.

Enraged, the merchants have even stopped coming to the temple. The other not-so-well-off people deliberately keep a *pie* before the goddess, in order to put one *pie* in the box. We are sick and tired of counting it. I have had to sound the box out of my sense of pride about the Rigveda. I had told Vrisha when he wrote the letter, "You dolt! What kind of thinking is yours! Isn't no judge from Ayodhye agreeable to you? Why would you be here?" "Don't insult Rigvedins", Bhima Bhatta had butted in then. "Rigveda!? What is Rigveda? Does Rigveda say you should slight the other three Vedas? We have lost value even among Brahmins. The other castes of course castigate us. We are really fools, who sound the box. In my seventy years of existence I haven't been affronted like this."

"Forget it, Shyama Bhatta! This is something between us. He is Tarkshya. Don't say it before him," suggested somebody.

"What kind of a royal member am I if I don't listen to your grievances? Why didn't you come to me all these days? The Kashi king will be here in another fifteen days. If Vrisha Bhatta doesn't pay up by that time, the trial will of course go on, but the nonpayment might be considered another charge."

"Vrisha Bhatta is a very poor man. Supposing we request the Kashi king that he be excused from this trust fund, does he have the authority to excuse him?"

"That is something that pertains to the Ayodhye Chief Justice. You may ask him. It is because of his generosity that this dispute has gone to him. You can't imagine how very pained he is."

"That is natural. I have said so many times that in point of fact this is an affront to the seat of justice of Ayodhye." Shyama Bhatta spoke up.

"Someone who was till recently the royal priest can not be that poor. In two years the treasurer has given him gold jewellery worth atleast two thousand *varahas*. I have myself gone and given him festive gifts."

"Bhima Bhatta is insistent that the gold that has come home should not find its way to the market." said an elder Brahmin.

This ruffled Shyama Bhatta. "This bowl of alms is from now on rejected," he said, as he flung the till down on the ground before leaving the temple in a huff. "Bhatta! Don't get angry!" consoled Tarkshya as he got up. "He is a Sanni Brahmin. Leave him alone, Tarkshya! Tell me what you want to do now" said, Shula Bhatta, the elder Brahmin, sitting Tarkshya down.

"What are you the terrestrial-gods saying? How can I talk about a plan which hasn't struck even you all these days?"

"Please pardon the offence we committed, Tarkshya! What can we do? Our real enemy is Vrisha Bhatta himself! If he had talked his father into selling a couple of tolas of gold, we wouldn't have had to knock about holding this begging bowl. Vrisha himself doesn't go about holding such a bowl. We have had to do this because of his royal priesthood and a couple of *varahas* of extra priestly fee we got. It won't take much to slam down the till like Shama bhatta did. But this is the debt of the *anna* we eat, fellow! You won't understand the lot of Brahmins. Please think of something to free us of this begging bowl."

"You people are saying there is no justice in Ayodhye for people with no money, aren't you?"

Holding them by the ear, Shula Bhatta dragged the brat who had said that, and pushed him at Tarkshya's feet. Shula Bhatta was a giant of a man. Although he was old he

was still quite strong. In the Brahmin neighbourhhod, the *agrahara*, he had been dubbed *shata-pooli* Shula Bhatta, the supremely dissolute Shula Bhatta!

"You can get any amount as a loan from the bursar."

"But Vrisha Bhatta picked up an unprovoked quarrel with the treasurer recently, didn't he?"

"When?"

"He took us away a week back saying he would show us how many private gifts went to Simha Bhatta.. We went there out of our innocence. Guess what he asked the treasurer! He asked him to account for the expenditure for the last thirty years! There must be a limit to one's asking. There have been five treasurers in the last thirty years. The treasurer drove him out saying something."

"What did he say?"

"He said a hundred and twelve *varahas* were due from Vrisha Bhatta."

"Shouldn't fifty *varahas* be given for the work of law and justice?"

"Bhima Bhatta has eaten up all that."

"How can one eat up so much?"

"*Ayyo*, you fellow! Even tons of gold do not suffice for Bhima Bhatta. He needs it for his habits. Let's not talk about it further. The more we talk the more exposed will the Rigvedins stand."

"Whatever be the squabble, this is state treasury, not the treasurer's personal treasury. I will have him told. Apart from the gold he has at home, does Vrisha have any other property?"

"He has a paddy field on the Shravasti border. He might get one half of the house they inherited as his share."

"Is Vrisha's a joint family?"

"Yes."

"It is not proper to smack the Brahmin on his belly. Even if the house is split, Vrisha Bhatta may stay with Bhima Bhatta. He could mortgage his share and get a loan from the state treasury, couldn't he? The treasurer may not say no if Vrisha says, 'It is for legal costs.' "

"We will ask Vrisha Bhatta."

"You people come to me in case the treasurer refuses to advance a loan. I will get you a loan with His Excellency's intervention. You don't have to pawn anything. If His Majesty is happy, he might even give it to you as a donation."

"People are saying that this Rigvedi Brahmin has been charged because the king's angry eye has fallen on him. What do you say to this?"

"If the king had been angry with the Rigvedins, would he have invited another Rigvedi as a judge?"

"No, he wouldn't have."

"Discard the begging bowl then, and go to the bursar. I will also have put in a word. I have kept a *varaha* before the goddess. I will put the same amount in your box as well as a token of the success of the Ayodhye mission." He inserted a one-*varaha* coin into their box.

"We feel fulfilled! We feel accomplished!" went up shouts from that group.

"The work is not over with your saying "We feel fulfilled!" I am going to be sixty next year. The function celebrating my sixtieth birthday is your responsibility. I have great respect for Rigvedins. It has doubled after seeing the Kashi king." Then he told them about the

conditions of the Kashi king viz that he would take only fruit and milk before the trial, he wouldn't eat meat till the judgement is pronounced, the condition that the Ayodhye king shouldn't see him and that he would stay in the Amrit mahal outside the city. Every one of these stirred the Rigvedins' pride and valour. Their curiousity to listen to his commentaries, lectures and religious discourses doubled.

On his way back home, Tarkshya met the treasurer, and told him, "The Brahmins will mortgage half of Vrisha Bhatta's house and ask for a loan. Record it before advancing any loan. If they ask for a donation, send them off to the king."

The trustees of the Vasanthika temple noticed a reduction in the weekly proceeds by about one eighth that week. On enquiry they learnt of the news of the Rigvedi Brahmins rattling their box and collecting money for Vrisha Bhatta. The very next day there appeared a notice on the entrance door of the temple, which said that no one should collect money in the temple premises and that any such activity should be reported immediately to the police officer.

When the till was opened the previous night, there were found twenty *pais*, three *addelis*, which is one eighth of an *aane*, and one *varaha*.

Both Bhima Bhatta and Vrisha Bhatta ruled out the idea of mortgaging either the paddy field or the house for a loan from the treasury.

Half of the Brahmins declined to go to the temple with the collection box. "If you don't listen to what we are saying, why should we do as you say?" remonstrated Shula Bhatta before walking off in a huff. Some more followed suit.

Bhima Bhatta thought up another idea to increase their collection.

There were two thousand *pai*s in a week's collection. Counting this was an arduous task. The value of the whole lot was just three *varahas*.(3 pais=1 *duddu*,4 *duddu*=1 *aanaka*,16 *aanaka*=I rupee, 4 rupees= 1*varaha*). In any case there is a need of pais in the temple. Why not distribute the pais? One might even get an allowance for doing it. He asked a merchant. "Oh by all means. An *anaka* is twelve *pais* You could give only ten *pais*. One *pai* for the distributor and one *pai* for you." he said.

"Will you take the responsibility of distributing it?"

"This is not the merchant's account. You assign this to beggars sitting in front of the temple. They will gladly agree. After giving a *pai* each to god and to you, there will be eight pais left. Who will go sounding them in a box? They will donate a couple of *pais* to the beggars also. That way the beggars will also be happy. Your money will come back to you."

Bhima Bhatta was delighted. He ran off from there without a word. The merchant told the old woman, smiling after Bhima Bhatta left, " Old woman! Your game is ahead!"

"There is great demand now for *pais* in the Vasanthika temple." Bhima Bhatta explained to the group of beggars walking along the *agrahara* lane the next day, " Give away whatever *aanakas* you may have. I will give eleven *pais* per *aanaka*. You give ten *pais* per *aanaka* before the temple. Devotees will place one *pai* before the goddess. You beg loudly for alms as you come out. No devotee will take a step with so many coins in the pocket. Then he will chuck at least a couple of *pais* at you as alms. My money

will have come back and your profit will be incalculable."

"Why would we come begging if we had *aanaka*s with us? We would also like you stretched our legs and relaxed at home." submitted one.

"Lend us sixty *pai*s each. After a week we will give you five *aanakas*, thus repaying the loan," suggested another.

"It is to us that the devotees gave the donation!" screamed a third one.

"Stay here. I will ask my son and retur,." said Bhima Bhatta as he went in to consult his son Vrisha Bhatta. The family members had been disturbed by the idea of pawning the house and the fields. The ruckus of the women hadn't yet stopped.

As soon as Bhima Bhatta broached the beggars' project, Vrisha yelled, "You do whatever you want. Don't bring it to me!"

Bhima Bhatta brought a paper, and as he handed a paper roll of sixty *pais*, said, " Press your thumb here. What is your name? Where do you live?" He wrote down such details of each of them. Elated, the beggars' horde marched toward the temple. They occupied their seats, laid out a piece of cloth in front before piling up a heap of *pais* on it. "Ten *pais* for one *aanaka*!" they roared.

After a while, having finished their morning bath and adoration of god, five or six Brahmins, the three sectarian marks on their foreheads, stalked to the temple, the one with the till bringing up the front. The police official there pointed to the notice on the front door, reading which the Brahmins retraced their steps. A clever idea occurred to a fallen-toothed Brahmin when they approached the circamambulating area of the temple. 'Taking the till into

the circumambulating section of the temple premises is prohibited.' So went the idea. 'Even if we stand outside it, against the entrance door, people who sympathise with Vrisha will still give us donations.'

They walked again into the temple premises and saw the police officer.

"My jurisdiction is only upto the circumambulating arena. You may stand outside."

"Beggars are sitting all around the temple. Why is the restriction only for us?"

"They are beggars. You are gods-on-earth."

Yet Vrisha Bhatta had announced he would give one aanaka each to whoever held the till-with-the-hole that day.

The devotees' donating frame of mind would vanish by the time they reached the place of circumambulation after getting ten *pais* from the beggars, giving one *pai* to the goddess, one *pai* for the *tirtha* and donating a couple of *pais*. Six Brahmins took turns to collect money standing in front of the circumambulatory part of the temple.

They saw there were twenty *pais* in the box when they opened the box on reaching home.

Vrisha Bhatta refused to give them one *aane* each. "You six people have collected twenty *pais*. If one divides equally, each one gets three *pais*. The remaining two *pais* are for the fund." he ruled.

No one came forward to take the box the following day.

Bhima Bhatta went himself and stood outside circumambulatory part. The collection that day was a mere ten *pais*.

Bhima Bhatta consoled himself with, 'Ten *pais* are five

times more than two *pais*!' He went again the next day. Seven *pais* accrued.

Bhima Bhatta wrote 'Former royal priest Pandita Vrisha Bhatta's judicial trial fund' in colorful stripes on a board. He placed the till before it before walking off to Lajjavanthi's place. The box seemed heavy when he came back in the evening. He opened it in Vrisha's presence. There were seventeen *pais* and quite a bit of sand. The proceeds that had plummeted to seven *pais* had risen to seventeen *pais* because of the board. The board however had vanished. Vrisha Bhatta bristled with anger when he saw the sand. He went the following day to the temple trustee and shouted at him. "The collection for the week used to be so much, and it came down to so much since the day you started collecting the trust fund along with your disciples." he told him. "Supposing this continues, there would be no money even for the ghee for the goddess." He showed him how the proceeds had come back to the original figures after he pasted the notice on the entrance door.

"Wasn't it the king who ordered the notice pasted?"

"What has the king to do with this? It was I who pasted the notice in order to make the worship of the goddess smooth."

"In the name of the work of the goddess you are doing the work of the king!"

"If you think so, that is your feeling. I have precious little to do with it."

The beggars seemed to have benefited from the sale of *pais*. From the following Sunday they carefully avoided going through Bhima Bhatta's lane on their way to the temple. They took several different routes.

Beating his chest, Bhima Bhatta ran to the temple and

complained to the police officer, "These people... these people... they have to repay the loan of five *aanes*. Put them in the prison."

A huge crowd gathered in front of the temple.

"Give us a month's time." some beggars begged, falling at Bhima Bhatta's feet. "We will pay it up."

"This is the money mobilized for Vrisha Bhatta's trial fund. This has to reach the judge within this week," Bhima Bhatta cried himself hoarse.

Several beggars ran out from the back door.

The police officer read aloud some seventy names. Of them only two or three, the ones who had spoken earlier, had remained. The others had fled.

"These beggars were selling one *anak*a for ten *pais," said a devotee.*

"Yes, it was this Bhatta who told us to do it," submitted a beggar.

"Yes, it was I who did it. That is my proposal. I thought of it because I thought counting two thousand pais was arduous. A merchant from my lane suggested this to me."

"This is not fair. Who is that merchant? Show him," The police officer put in.

"Did you say one *aane* should be sold for ten *pais*," he asked as he met the merchant.

"Bhatta asked me how to make five *aanes* into six *aanes*. He also said there is a demand in the temple for *pais*. It is true that I told him that it was not a matter of trade and merchandising, that we couldn't participate in it and that if he pleased he could go to the beggars. Beggars could escape saying they don't understand accounts, but it would be unethical for a merchant to say it."

"Did you tell this beggar to trade one anna for ten pais?"

"I haven't seen this beggar at all."

"The one who told us was this Bhatta, not that merchant," corrected the beggar.

"It was the merchant who formulated the plan. It was I who told them."

"You come with me then to the judge," arbitrated the police official.

"Bhima Bhatta! You are deeply conversant with the Vedas, and are a master of Vedic *pathas*. Is it becoming of you to make this mistake?" asked the judge in a fret of anger.

"This is not a mistake, sir. It is trade."

"If Brahmins start trading, even trading would become a mistake. Go off. I have pardoned you this time. Deposit your pais in the original principal account."

The list that he had prepared remained with the Bhatta.

By the time the period expired, the deposit of eighteen *varahas* had reduced to fifteen *varahas*. Bhima Bhatta had spent one *varaha* for writing the board and one *varaha* he had spent for the expenses during his rest.

His 'pai' project had caused considerable offence. Especially that he spent money for the propaganda and his rest had evoked a feeling of disgust in the Rigvedi brahmins. They grumbled that this was misuse of the money they had got together.

* * * *

When it was two days for the period to run out, Shama Bhatta the madcap went to Vrisha Bhatta's place. "Have you thought of throwing the Rigvedian Brahmins' honour

to the winds?" he scoffed, before posing a challenge to him: "If you have any authority over your wife, take whatever jewellery there is and leave. We could get money either mortgaging it or selling it." When they went in they saw that all the women had securely locked their boxes and were seated implacably on them.

"Why should we give away our jewels? What will we be left with if we do that?" questioned the mother. She had suffered from the harrassments meted out to her by her pervert husband, losing whatever gold they had. She was not at all prepared to part with the new-found fund they had recently got.

"Save me in this," he begged his wife, walking over to her. The child was playing thereabouts. Without getting up from where she was seated, she took up the child, and undoing the silver bracelets, handed them over to her husband.

"All right, this might fetch us ten to twenty *varahas*." said Shama Bhatta and Vrisha Bhatta to themselves as they headed to the goldsmith.

"This is not silver. It is *hombu* brass. It might not cost even a *varaha*." averred the goldsmith.

Shama Bhatta pulled at Vrisha Bhatta, saying "Let's go to the treasurer." Without a word in response, Vrisha Bhatta went along.

"To grant such loans we need a royal order." said the treasurer. Accordingly Vrisha wrote out a request in the treasurer's name: "I need this amount as a deposit for the judicial inquiry. I will repay this in two years. I will give over as the deposit the part of the hereditary house I will get as my share. I need a hundred *varahas*." " One gets fifty *varahas* if one asks for hundred *varahas*." the

treasurer had said. He also said, "You should take the prayer yourself to His Excellency. He may take a week to attend to this if we send it."

Vrisha Bhatta didn't have the face to see His Excellency. He agreed to do it at Shama Bhatta's insistence. "Where is Tarkshya?" asked Shama Bhatta. "Tarkshya would be in the room where Vrisha Bhatta was earlier." answered the treasurer before going over to Tarkshya's room and showing him his papers.

"Didn't you get enough money at the temple?" asked Tarkshya.

"No, we didn't." replied Shama Bhatta. "We could get only eighteen *varahas*. Five *varahas* were misspent because of his father's foolishness. What we are left with now is thirteen *varahas* and a few *pais*."

"How many more *varahas* do you want?"

"Thirty seven."

"But you have asked for hundred *varahas* in this prayer, haven't you?"

"One gets fifty if one asks for a hundred. This is a government office. Not a place where moneyed people lend money for interest." returned the treasurer.

"Won't it do if you get thirty seven *varahas* now?"

"Look, Tarkshya! We have mortgaged the house, and we asked for fifty *varahas*. Is that a mistake?"

"I didn't ask the question with that intention. What I had in mind was if His Majesty is satisfied, you could make an attempt to get the money as donation, without you pawning anything or asking for a loan."

"Please do that much for us, Tarkshya! Vrisha's whole household will remain indebted to you for it. There is

uproar in the house. His wife has given away the child's silver wristlets. 'This is *hombu* brass, not silver' the goldsmith said."

"Our His Majesty is liberal of mind. I don't know what your fate has in store for you." said Tarkshya peaceably. "Go ahead, meet the king. I will be right behind you." Saying this Tarkshya sent them off to the king upstairs, and he sat quietly back, saying to himself, " Let the initial tempest blow over!"

It didn't take long for the tempest to blow. "His Excellency is calling you!" said the stick-wielding royal watchman, running down from upstairs.

Tarkshya ran up at once and got into the king's room.

"Who let him in?" asked the king.

"It was me who did it, Your Excellency! He has submitted an application for a loan. The treasurer himself wanted him to see you."

"Have the goldsmiths' shops gone to seed for people to approach me for loans?"

"They ask for a deposit there. If His Excellency gives over fifty *varahas* to Vrisha even if in the form of donation as a token of the fact that he was once the royal priest, you would have done Vrisha Bhatta's family a favour."

"Hasn't he got anything as the royal priest?"

"He has, Your Highness! He has got in ample measure. Most of it however has gone as present to the married woman. That would be womanly money. Men have no authority over it. You know Bhima Bhatta's nature, don't you? He is a spendthrift. He has squandered a lot of money. His devoted steadfast wife doesn't agree to give away gold in the well-meaning belief that there should remain

something in the house. That is feminine nature. What remains then is a paddy field on the far bank of the Sarayu river, and a hereditary house. It was in Shravasti twenty years ago. Who would loan money in exchange for mortgaging such property? What he has shown is hundred *varahas*. But what he wants as the deposit for the court is fifty *varahas*. My opinion is that it is proper for His Majesty to give this in the form of donation out of kindness for devoted steadfast wives."

"Donation for whom? For this snake of a man?" bristled the king.

"True, Your Excellency! The father and son both have loose tongues. But as far as I know being liberal towards even enemies is your nature."

"I have been liberal to enemies on the battlefield. Not to such rogues."

"Generosity not for him, Your Excellency! For his mother and wife who are steadfast faithful wives."

"All right. Let him sit in the treasurer's office. I will let you know my decision later."

Vrisha reviled Shama Bhatta whole-heartedly all the way till they got to the treasurer's office. "We listened to our family's history because I came here at your insistence. Let's not sit here. He will not give us any loan."

"Stay, you silly mutt! Go back we have to in any case, after he says no."

* * * *

The following dialogue took place in the king's chambers:

"Tarkshya! I saw a thought playing on your face. That's the reason I tolerated him. I would have otherwise had him pushed out by the guardsman"

"Wow! You are a clever boy, Trasadasyu! You are now beginning to understand some politics. In fact the letter came at my suggestion."

"Is it preparation of the ground to send Vrisha out of Ayodhye?"

"Not only that. It is also a plan to rein in his tongue."

"What should be done now?"

"Give fifty *varahas* out of your personal treasury. Write as I say on this paper." He had an order written which was as follows:

'I have given this money, fifty *varahas*, from my personal treasury. According to the agreement of this letter, we can treat this as loan for now. I will turn it into donation once we evaluate Vrisha's conduct in the future. If his behaviour is not satisfactory, we could have him pay fifty *varahas* and the interest on it treating it as government loan. Or we could attach half his house.'

Having had this written up, Tarkshya entered the treasurer's office, his face long and livid. Looking at his face one could say that the loan hadn't been sanctioned.

"Somebody who doesn't like you has lied that you have spoken things slandering and reviling the king. His Excellency is troubled and upset."

"Get going, Shama Bhatta! We know now what has happened."

"Sit quietly, you dolt!" chastised Shama Bhatta holding him by the forearm and sitting him.

"You are anyway really fortunate. Your work is done. Did you squabble with His Excellency in the chariot the other day, Vrisha Bhatta?"

"No, nothing of the sort happened. I put the child onto

the chariot. The parents came over from behind. I stayed right there."

"Do you have any enemies?"

"I don't as far as I know. I learned that His Majesty was perturbed only after he got the letter from the judge."

"Why didn't His Worshipful majesty talk to you directly?"

"That is the sign of his anger. I don't as yet know why he became so angry."

"It is clear that somebody has poisoned his mind. Okay, be it what it might. Here are the fifty *varahas*. This is given to the treasurer. That is His Excellency's order. Sit right here and read it carefully before mulling over it. Decide whether this money has to reach him. I am in any case tired. I had never seen His Excellency get so angry. Yet you are lucky! Come to my room if you have anything to ask about the order." Saying this Tarkshya gave them the paper and left.

Both the Brahmins came to Tarkshya's room after a while. Shama Bhatta was about to fall at Tarkshya's feet when Tarkshya held him as he said: " What are you doing, you the human gods? You are the ones who should bless us. If you fall at our feet, the doom of Kshatriyas is a foregone conclusion. Haven't you heard of the fate that befell Nahusha?"

"You have helped us, fellow! You have resolved a tough question for us."

"This is hardly a tough question. Even in the highly tormented and inflamed state of mind he was in, His Excellency implemented my suggestion. Let us all remember his help."

Vrisha Bhatta, who stood with his mien stiff and serious, asked:"Is the purpose behind this, kindness or intimidation?"

"It is both. Kindness for the women of your household, and intimidation for you two, father and son."

"What crime have we committed?"

"I don't know what crime you have committed. But I know everything about your father. Didn't you spend one *varaha* out of the money you collected at the temple for Bhima Bhatta's rest? Shall I tell you the story of that 'rest'? Bhima Bhatta went to Lajjavanthi the prostitute's place at ten in the morning. He made her get up from the pooje she had sat down for. He left her place at eleven. Going home, he took his bath and did his pooje. When Lajjavanthi was up she saw her toerings were missing. As the furious Lajjavanthi went searching for Bhima Bhatta, she went to the place where his box had been kept. Out of anger she filled the box with sand before she preferred a complaint with the temple police. That plaint reached His Excellency. "When Purukutsani was at the helm" I told his Excellency myself, "she wouldn't see any complaints against the Brahmins of the brahmin neighbourhood herself because if she did, when she made salutations to the same Brahmins at the time of yaga, she feared, there would arise doubts, misunderstandings and bad thoughts. You shouldn't think too much about these things. You should leave such things to us." His Majesty agreed. I sent Veerasena. Veerasena bashed up Bhima Bhatta when he was on his way to the temple after his bath etc. "I have given her one *varaha* but she should have been given half a *varaha*. So I brought along her toering." Bhima Bhatta shouted. When told about Bhima Bhatta's reaction, Lajjavanthi bristled, "There was

no such understanding. Go spit on his face. He disturbed me while I was offering my *pooje*." Cornered, Bhima Bhatta then quietly took out a toering from his pocket and handed it over. This is the story that happened recently. We don't hesitate to go to prostitutes' houses. But the transaction should be clean. "What is the evidence to say that I went to her place?" asked Bhima Bhatta after everything. She went in and brought the *varaha* that he had given her, his sacred thread and, as she put before them a toering, submitted, "This is the other piece of my pair of toerings." "Bhatta!" Veerasena teased him, "You should have asked this question right at the beginning. What is the point of asking it now?" Tarkshya smiled an amused smile as he said wryly to himself, 'A Brahmin who doesn't know even this is a *ghanapathi*, it seems! This man was a royal priest for a year!

"I can't believe this!" Vrisha Bhatta spoke up.

"One needn't be surprised by this. Your father has been like this. Once when you were three years old, there was no milk for the children for three days. Your mother complained to Her Excellency. I came over myself, fixed up a milkman myself besides handing over in advance the yearly milk allowance. I saw you. Didn't your mother tell you about the story of the *dhotra*? Once playing the pimp for a prostitute, he had taken away all the money. That whore took away your father's *dhotra* that had been cleaned and put out to dry the following day. Your father came to the temple, did the *pooje* on a dirty and worn out *dhotra* that day. Do you know how he came to be dubbed 'ghanapathi'? It was a nickname given in jest, but it came to stay. Shall I tell you? You talk to your mother; you will come to know everything. She is a clean chaste woman.

She has suffered in life. That is why she is reluctant to pawn away the gold that is there in the house. You tell her about your pawning away half your house, and see what will happen. She has swallowed silently all the sufferings of your childhood. If you tell her this, all those stories will come out. Man should have limits and prudence. Veerasena and me had laughed in our sleeves when he was made the royal priest."

"How did you get to know all these?" asked Shama Bhatta.

"Her Excellency had asked me to deal with all the complaints that came from the Brahmin neighbourhood. I have dealt with them for the last ten years in such a way that there was no public dispute. Her Excellency was careful to see that the honour of the Brahmin neighbourhood was not affected. She used to tell us to see that no dispute became public. Whatever be the dispute we used to go over and try a resolution. Then Her Majesty assigned us work abroad. I haven't paid any attention to the Brahmin neighbourhood for the last ten years. I have all the previous records," said Vrisha as he showed a big bundle of papers.

"I should believe it because you are showing the bundle of papers. But my father's age is now seventy?"

"Even if the tamarind tree is old, would the tamarind fruit get old? You ask him about the toering episode. Why should I tell you? The dhotra episode, the milk episode, and the newest toering episode - most of the complaints in this bundle pertain to your father. Atleast ask him this: How did you become a *ghanapathi*? Who is your guru? Or, do this! The Kashi king is coming tomorrow. There will be meetings, discussions and commentaries. Your father will

of course speak in the meetings as is his wont. He will let on. You will get answers that will evoke negative responses from your people. You will see."

"How did my father become a *ghanapathi*?"

"I can't say. The respect that you have for your father may evaporate. It is my responsibility to see that disputes don't arise in your home. I have told His Excellency only the other day that he should leave any matter having to do with the Brahmin neighbourhood to me. Besides I haven't received any complaint about it. I am afraid of speaking when there are no records."

"I won't ask for records. Tell me whatever you know. That would do."

"Should I?" asked Tarkshya turning to Shama Bhatta.

"Go on. I knew some of Bhima Bhatta's peccadilloes, but I don't know this."

"There lived here a famous dancer called Lalitambe fifty years ago. Mriganayane was her daughter, the great woman who was with King Purukutsa during his last days in prison, and looked after him. The *pooje* at her house used to be done by Simha Bhatta, the twelve-year-old boy. She used to keep one *anna* every day as the priestly present. The mother was a very virtuous, pious woman. One day she didn't have the money to be offered as the priestly present. She begged his forgiveness. Even then she wasn't satisfied. As Simha Bhatta was to leave after finishing the pooje, she held him by the hand and took him into a room. "You make love to me, that would be my priestly present to you for today!" she offered. Simha Bhatta was still a callow boy then. Scared and baffled, he ran away, it seems. When in the evening, he met the fourteen-year-old Bhima Bhatta, one of his friends, Simha

Bhatta told him this. "Why did you run away, you blithering fool!" Bhima Bhatta told him. "Had I been in your place, I would unfailingly have tasted its honeyed savour!" Lalitambe was a well-built woman. It was then that the elder Brahmin boys started to call him 'ghanapathi'. This pun of a nickname came to stay."

The irony of appointing his father as the royal priest for the wedding at his insistence came home to Vrisha then. He understood the secret of his father's cock-eyed pronunciation. He felt a deep twinge of regret. The desire to tell this to Shama Bhatta in the Brahmin neighbourhood stirred in him. None of the young Brahmins who gave him this name was alive.

Shama Bhatta was furious that making the name that he was given in jest the real one, Bhima Bhatta took up their leadership, and took them for a ride throughout their lives.

"We take leave then" said Shama Bhatta, an unhappy streak in his voice.

"If you think it is appropriate, express your gratitude to His Excellency."

"We are going right there," said Shama Bhatta, leaving. Vrisha followed him.

* * * *

Receiving the Kashi king at the outer entrance gate, Trasadasyu had taken him in a procession and left him at the Amrit Mahal. King Ketumanta the Kashi king was in a stiff and reticent mood. Even as he found himself in Ayodhye, his mind was back in Kashi. He had given charge to his brother Divodasa. Divodasa was quick-witted. That was the reason the king was worried. It is true that Divodasa had said, "I will keep you posted about things in

Kashi. You come back soon." The brothers were poles apart in personality. Ketumanta was fond of peace, scholarship and the arts. Divodasa was brave and bellicose. He believed that it was his elder brother's peace-loving leanings and interests that had wrecked Kashi's glory. His opinion was that kings should be like kings, and not like selfless, liberal trustees, showing people the righteous path and overseeing their well-being. Ketumanta on the other hand thought that aggressiveness would lead to disputes and this would tell on peaceful life. These differences of opinion had indeed become public several times. Now Ketumanta had come to Ayodhye leaving everything to god as he handed the charge to his brother. But he had this apprehension that, picking up quarrels Divodasa would mount attacks on other kingdoms. He was confident that the dispute to settle which he had come to Ayodhye would be resolved inside fifteen days. He had thought of spending the next week on jaunts with Trasadasyu before making his way back to Kashi. He had warned before coming over that even if the kingdoms of Nepal, Champavathi, Gaya, Kalanjara behaved provocatively, Divodasa shouldn't do anything until he himself returned.

King Ketumanta hadn't fancied that the posture of stiff reticence that he had assumed in an effort to be stand offish with Trasadasyu because he was an arbitrating judge would remain even after the enquiry was over. Whatever was to happen did happen. He hadn't known the reason behind it. Trasadasyu, who returned from Amaru, was very sad and downcast. His decision to learn the truth was only half successful. Instead the incident that he had brought upon his mother had led to extreme consequences, embittering his own nature. In that ambivalent mood, he had one day thought of letting flow all his blood, and so cut his hand.

Tarkshya however came on the scene in time and slapping him, made him realise what he was doing. Yet the bitterness had remained. Vrisha Bhatta's loan episode, appearing as it did at this time, had given Trasadasyu a lifeline. It was the feeling of responsibility that made him say 'whatever happens, I am the king. I will fulfil this responsibility.' Which infused new life into him. The fruits of his quest for truth were nothing to write home about.

Having heard Tarkshya's words, Vrisha developed confidence in him rather than in the king. Scorn was what he developed about his own father. He threatened to hit him in case his father opened his mouth in meetings. This silenced his father. As the judicial enquiry proceeded, its futility began to be realised. Vrisha did feel sometime that he should own his mistake and be ready to suffer whatever punishment came his way. But the bitterness of the loan of fifty varahas prepared him for the trial.

The first disappointment for the Kashi king was that the child, the center of the dispute, was alive. And it was a verbal enquiry. He felt that he had come there on a trivial mission and because of this he developed disinclination in the enquiry. A judge from Ayodhye could have conducted such a verbal enquiry, he thought, and did make it known on the very first day.

Only one question was at the centre of the enquiry:

'In whose hands were the reins when the child was wounded?' Even as this question was resolved, there arose another question:

Vrisha was a Brahmin. If he was found guilty, what was the punishment he could be given?

Trasadasyu was a king. In case he was found guilty, what was the punishment he could be given?

It would be inappropriate to send them to prison. One could impose some penalty. How much?

In case Vrisha was convicted, one could impose a penalty of five to fifteen *varahas* because he was poor. If the king was convicted, he could be handed a penalty of five hundred to a thousand *varahas*. They would have the same value.

Did Vrisha insist obstinately on having the reins, or did the king insist that Vrisha took the reins?, the Kashi found himself asking himself wordlessly as he fell into a meditation about the whole incident. If this was proved one could recognise the probabilities. However one could determine the probability and not the actuality of in whose hands the reins were when the accident came off. Is such a probability the essence of this enquiry or is it the actuality? Or, is it neither? I am a charioteer too. How would a trial be proper about an accident done by an immature boy, given the charge of a vehicle. These are inane questions. The child is alive and kicking, he is playing. Why don't people be grateful for this graceful act of god's and not do anything about it? Is there no one who could teach Ayodhye these things, drill some sense into the Ayodhyeyians?. Had this happened in Kashi, I would have shut up both by giving them a resounding slap. That is not possible here. This is not a land of rectitude and righteousness. It seems to be a land of judges: witnesses, evidence, record, cross-examination.There is none, alas, who would praise god in this situation of bothersome trouble because the child survived. The Kashi king felt a dart of disappointment about Ayodhye as well. He bemoaned the fact that he had to spend his days on milk and fruits to arbitrate such a dispute.

This was a justiceless dispute. People needed to look inwards. Whenever a witness faced him King Ketumanta would look absent-mindedly at his face wondering why there were no machines by which one could examine someone else's conscience.

The discourses and discussions in the evening would be colourful and vibrant. In his first lecture, which was on 'God's graceful mercy', Ketumanta had a good dig at the Ayodhye scholarship. "Why did you call us all the way from Kashi for a trial? People have already got justice, haven't they? You have no eyes to see." he would say citing the actual dispute and pouring out his anxious concern. "This is the only time I have theoretically discussed the dispute in my evening discourse. This is actually outside the boundary line that I have drawn. The main thing is that such disputes would not have arisen in Kashi. When one sees god's graceful kindness, the spiritedness to appreciate such divine kindness is available in Kashi and not in your land. Your people are scholars. I have heard that they discuss the Vedas quite a bit. Why don't you people think that even the Vedas are also god's merciful grace. The four Vedas are god's four breaths. The one who breathes is only one. Would one breath squabble with another? Even assuming it does, would the animal kingdom thrive? If you people give up such trivial searches for truth and justice, and if you understand the real inner truth and justice, there is no way such disputes can arise... *shubham bhavatu.*" A pleasantly stunned assemblage broke into thunderous clapping. Everyone liked and appreciated the Kashi king's mature line of argumentation. Trasadasyu too realised it before he too clapped. He gave the Kashi king an open hug and garlanded him. Holding him by the hand, he took him

up to the chariot, had him sit in before taking leave. All the commentaries that day came in for particular praise. The community of Ayodhye scholars put their tails between their legs.

The next day's lecture dripped with intense robust scholarship. Trasadasyu however had no aptitude, interest or knowledge in such subtle things, in things such as grammar, etymology and rational enquiry. He in fact stopped coming for the meetings. The Kashi king thought it was His Excellency's just nature. This satisfied him. Vrisha thought the king was an ignoramus. The general public thought it was an expression of the king's desire to be away from the seat of justice in order not to influence it, and hence was all praise for him. In any case the science of knowledge began in Ayodhye. Judicial enquiry fell behind.

Simha Bhatta, who could match the Kashi king in argumentation, was in an Amaru hut, lolling in Purukutsani's arms, speaking crazed things. He used to have brain hemorrhage and lose consciousness., "This is great joy!" he would stammer as he leaned against Purukutsani's thighs, half dead.

Not many people had come on the judgement day. Neither the respondent nor the main witness was there. The plaintiff was there along with his family out of a sense of duty. Only Bhima Bhatta and Shama Bhatta were there from Vrisha Bhatta's side. Justice Trisanu, Tarkshya and Vatsaraja were engaged in doing unnecessary, even if dutiful, things.

King Ketumanta began his presentation: 'Both the parties have presented witnesses. There is difference of opinion about what actually happened. The central question is who had the reins at the time of the accident.

The king has said they were with Sri Vrisha Bhatta. He has also averred that hearing the boy's screams, he quickly grabbed the reins from Sri Vrisha Bhatta's hands. Some people have been witness to the fact that at the time the chariot stopped, the reins were in the king's hands. But by that time the accident had come off. That is in fact why the reins were grabbed. These two witnesses are the two faces of the same incident, parts of the same statement. The incidents that happened before the accident came off thus assume more importance. 'I had to give in because Vrisha Bhatta taunted and jeered me when I hesitated to hand the reins over.' the king has said. Sri Vrisha Bhatta has agreed that this happened. There is agreement here as well. This incident gains in strength for the reasons stated above. One could state this in any one of two ways. Sri Vrisha Bhatta doesn't know how to drive a chariot. By handing the reins over to such a man, did the king escape his responsibility? To ask the same question in another way, did Sri Vrisha Bhatta draw away from his responsibility by getting the reins by taunting and jeering the king although he had no experience of driving chariots? Unknowledge is as significant a responsibility as knowledge. Thus Sri Vrisha Bhatta's behavior of getting the reins on that crowded evening by taunting and jeering the king even when the king argued against it assumes greater significance even though it was born of ignorance. The point that the king did know about Sri Vrisha Bhatta's experience doesn't hold water because he, who was a royal priest for three years, might have learnt driving elsewhere. Atleast both of them have agreed that at the time Sri Vrisha Bhatta insisted that he be given the reins, Sri Vrisha Bhatta told the king repeatedly that he was a royal priest. Even in the statement made before the court Sri Vrisha Bhatta has stressed this. It

is clear that the same thing has become the cause of the accident later. Because of this I, without any shred of doubt, blame the accident on Sri Vrisha Bhatta. By god's grace Gajanana the child survived. But the king took on himself the responsibility of treatment. Sri Vrisha Bhatta never ever visited the injured child or his father Simhikendra the plaintiff and enquired after their health.

Of all witnesses the witness of one's conscience is the most significant. By his preincident and postincident conduct Sri Vrisha Bhatta has behaved as if he is the culprit by conscience.

I, Ketumanta, the Kashi king, therefore pronounce Sri Vrisha Bhatta guilty on two counts and impose two kinds of penalty:

1. 35 *varahas* for causing the accident

2. 35 *varahas* for his irresponsible postaccident behaviour.

3. 35 *varahas* for the child's medical expenses.

I assign the Chief Justice of Ayodhye the task of distributing the medical expenses according to whoever treated the child.

Now remain the legal costs. I leave this to the Chief Justice of Ayodhye. However I recommend that it would be good if the two parties bear their own litigation expenses considering Sri Vrisha Bhatta's indigence.

The Delivered judgement dated.....
Sd/-

His Excellency the king of Kashi, King Ketumanta

The moment Bhima Bhatta heard the judgement, he screamed, "Vrisha Bhatta hasn't learnt driving chariots." Shama Bhatta sat him down, holding him by the arm as he said, "Royal priests would have learnt driving chariots in

many countries. The Kashi king talked about the position of royal priests, and not about Vrisha Bhatta."

The Kashi king rose. There were no people to praise the judgement. Trisanu and Tarkshya appreciated the king's sense of justice.

The Kashi king took some rest that evening. He set out for his country the very next day. He didn't feel the need to rest for a week. There were no reports from Kashi. If he stayed on for long, he thought, he had to see King Trasadasyu. That wouldn't be proper. He told Trisanu that he was leaving for Kashi the following day. He sent a message to Kashi as well.

Since Trisanu had tomtommed the news, a thick crowd had assembled. It was afternoon by the time everything was over: the honours being done to people, handing over of citations, gifts, Ayodhye's special jewellery, garlands and so on. The ritual of a meal in Trisanu's house got over too. A huge concourse of people came upto the Sarayu river to see off the Kashi king, uttering cries of victory. Trasadasyu, Tarkshya and Trisanu went upto the Ganga. On the other bank of the Ganga stood a muster of a hundred soldiers along with a chariot. The Kashi king got on the boat and bade them goodbye, getting his folded hands together against his chest in salutation. All the three stood there till the boat got to the other end. As he disembarked, the Kashi king waved again in farewell greeting. The three at the other bank stood with their hands in the air, waving till the king got onto his chariot. Their commander didn't look back at the party on the other bank. The convoy made its way to Kashi, the escort soldiers silently surrounding the chariot.

The three personages from Ayodhye turned their

horses Ayodhyeward and went a few steps. "Wait here!" said Tarkshya suddenly before he turned his horse, rode it swiftly toward the river ghat, halted on an elevated place thereabouts before shouting, "Mr commander! Convey Tarkshya's greetings to your people."

Nobody paid heed. Turning half-heartedly the commander looked, but proceeded without raising his hand.

Tarkshya jumped down from the horse. "You, mother Ganga, you are witness!" said he as got into the river, drank three palmfuls of Ganga water as he jabbered some mantras before sprinkling some water on himself. Then he joined the other two.

"What is it? What happened?" asked Trasadasyu.

Tarkshya didn't reply. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon. The sun was going down. The threesome rode quietly and got to Ayodhye.

* * * *

The news came the following day: the Kashi king was placed under house arrest in his own palace. Divodasa was to be crowned the king in the next three days, on the fifth day of the first fortnight of the month of *Karthika*!

"I am done for!" Tarkshya wrung his hands in frustration. "I should no longer remain a close minister of the king. It was a mistake to have kept a secret the fact I was Tarkshya when I went to Kashi. If it was known, the Kashi king could have sought my advice. I tried the most. I made as if I was telling Ayodhye's secrets. I presented temptations. But the Kashi king didn't open his heart. I thought Ketumanta was not foolish to hand over the administration to Divodasa. But my hunch has proved wrong. Wouldn't one's younger brother try to achieve

sibling one-upmanship if he is handed the reins of administraion? He is, of all people, Divodasa! He has just come of age. The subjects wouldn't oppose it. If the administration had been handed over to a commander or the premier, this wouldn't have happened. Now the Vedic scholar is a prisoner all his life. A victim of the seat of justice of Ayodhye!"

The Ayodhye subjects, who had bid such an affectionate farewell to the Kashi king, wrung their hands too in frustration. Each one had his reason, except for Bhima Bhatta!

As for Trasadasyu, he started to weep because he didn't have the good fortune of being deposed!

What a pious, religious figure I in fact am! And to think what level I have plummeted to! he told himself in an inner turmoil. The sense of righteous justice that Ketumanta had instilled with a gavel for fifteen days had come plunging from the moment of the incident of his ouster.

"Just punishment has been meted out to the venal man who imposed a penalty on Rigvedic Brahmins!" Bhima Bhatta started bitching at once. "Where will injustice escape to? It has to come back to the one who perpetrated it!"

TRASADASYU-6

The news of Simha Bhatta's death provided impetus to the old speculations.

He had evinced symptoms of brain hemorrhage since the day he saw Purukutsani. Besides headache, his anger augmented. Once right during coitus he tried to wring her neck as he spluttered, "You slut! You drove me crazy!" Joy, anger and disdain whirled in his head at the same time. He made love to her after begging, beseeching, tottering and getting angry right till the day before his death. The culminating point of anger is also that. Uttering obscenities, he plagued and pestered her day and night before pounding into her and sucking the sap out of her body. Her figure seemed to loosen. Simha Bhatta's craze wore off a bit. But the blood vessels in his brain swelled like blood-sucking bedbugs. Sage Devadema gave him the treatment with needles. He inserted an instrument into the vessels in the head and the forehead once in four days and let blood flow out. They would again swell in the next four days. Anyway the old man died at last. If he had fortunately survived, even Purukutsani would have got joint pains, who knows. She lent herself to all of the brutal experience afforded by the madman.

Simha Bhatta's grave was dug in Amaru itself.

Tidings arose in Amaru of Simha Bhatta breathing his last in Purukutsani's lap, of Kripa devi not being able to get up to interfere in their activities because of her joint pains and of Her Excellency the queen staying in Sage Devadema's hermitage. This was grist to Ayodhye's whispered rumour mill.

Hearing of their father's death, his children went to Amaru and returned. "Call Trasadasyu for the monthly obsequial ceremony." said Bhima Bhatta to Naga Bhatta, Bhima Bhatta's elder son. Without quite understanding the meaning behind Bhima Bhatta's suggestion, Naga Bhatta went off to invite Trasadasyu. "I don't eat anywhere outside home. Get me the *prasada*," said Trasadasyu. When in the evening Chitra Bhatta, Naga Bhatta's younger brother, was on his way to the palace to hand over the *prasada* to the king, Bhima Bhatta stopped him, "*Chii*! Does one take *prasada* like this? It should be taken in a procession." he insisted. A horde of Brahmin boys set out to deliver the *prasada* to His Excellency with a music band. When Bhima Bhatta spotted Tarkshya coming from the opposite direction, he quickly took to his heels. "What is the noise about?" asked Tarkshya. "We are on our way to the palace to give His Excellency the king the *prasada* of Bhima Bhatta's monthly death ceremony," answered the children.

"Why all this music for that? Why so many boys?"

"Bhima Bhatta said, 'If you go alone, you won't get the royal honours. Some twenty boys should go together. That way you will get the priestly present.' We don't know who sent the music band."

Bandsman Bhaapuri submitted, " 'We have to take the prasada of Simha Bhatta's monthly death ritual. 'You go over with these children along with a musical band. The palace people will give you money as well,' Sri Bhima Bhatta told us. We don't have much work this time of the year. So we came along."

"Where is your elder brother?'

"He is at home."

"Even ringing a bell is prohibited during the time of

the monthly death ritual. The soul of the departed seeks peace. Will your father's soul get peace if you play the musical band?"

"Even I felt this was taboo. But Bhima Bhatta said, 'That is the royal door. If you go like this, even the guardsman will not let you in.' "

Tarkshya paid the bandsmen some money and sent them off.

"None of you should come. I will take Chitra Bhatta along and deliver the prasada." said Tarkshya before going off with Chitra Bhatta.

Tarkshya felt the situation was getting out of hand.

He went To Trisanu after handing over the *prasada*. Trisanu had forgotten the defamation case. Besides, the usually stipulated period for paying the penalty was six months. The arbitrating Kashi king hadn't stipulated any deadline for Vrisha paying the penalty of a hundred and five *varahas*. According to the Ayodhye law, there still was one month left.

"The Kashi king hadn't mentioned any period. According to our law, there is still a month. But reckoning from the day of the accident, time is up," averred Tarkshya.

"Why?" asked Trisanu. "Do you want him to leave Ayodhye fast?"

"I have just come after thwarting and nullifying another of Bhima Bhatta's wicked designs," submitted Tarkshya, describing Bhima Bhatta's attempt to take the *prasada* of the monthly death ritual with musical fanfare. "Bhima Bhatta ran away seeing me. Otherwise I would have taken the hell out of him."

Trisanu said:" You could do that because you went

there at the right time. Perhaps Sri Bhima Bhatta had the idea of taking the boy along and saying:" He is your elder brother, fellow!" Trisanu gave a light laugh.

"This is not something to be laughed over, Trisanu! This is the question of Ayodhye's honour. It seems it is impossible to keep our self-respect in tact as long as Bhima Bhatta and Vrisha Bhatta are around in Ayodhye."

Tarkshya wrote out the text. It said: Vrisha Bhatta should present himself inside three days to reply to the charge of slandering the Ayodhyeyian seat of justice. Secondly, since the Kashi king didn't stipulate any time period, Trisanu reckoned it from the time of the accident, and said the period was up. Yet since Vrisha Bhatta wasn't in town, a three days' grace period had been given. "Tell your people to stick this tonight on Vrisha Bhatta's house door and at other places." commanded Tarkshya and left.

The following morning Vrisha Bhatta and Bhima Bhatta saw the notices. They flounced away to Trisanu's home and reviled him with a spate of insults, invectives, swear words and four-letter words before trying to bash him up. The house-servants handed them over to the police official. The police officer put them in one jailroom and locked them in.

Tarkshya hadn't expected this event.

He took Veerasena and came to the old grandfatherly Devaraja. Devaraja was now eighty years old. He had seen enough of life. Tarkshya described the day's events to him before asking, "Could you tell us where Bhima Bhatta's paddy fields are?"

"In the village of Tamralepa."

"Does he have his house there?"

"He might. If the houses haven't been maintained, the

walls might well have collapsed now."

"Can they stay in the house of a farmer of your acquaintance till such time that the houses are repaired?"

"Yes, by all means. Vatsaraja will arrange for it."

"Sir, a delicate situation has arisen now. His wife and children don't know that Bhima Bhatta has been imprisoned. They have plenty of gold with them. But that great lady jibs at helping him, considering the life of wasteful and unmitigated decadence that Bhima Bhatta led before. Knowing her mother-in-law's experience the daughter-in-law also refuses to part with her gold. That is natural. Now Veerasena will go and convey the news to them. My prayer to you now is that you and Vatsaraja should inject courage into them and advise them to go to Tamralepa. There is no possibility now of their property staying intact here. They have to pay hundred and five *varahas* as penalty. Fifty *varahas* from the royal treasury. A hundred and twenty *varahas* that Vrisha Bhatta had taken as an advance when he was the royal priest. If their grass-house is auctioned, one might get at the most thirty or forty *varahas*. Their house will be searched in three days. I am saying this out of compassion for the women. Such a notice has already been pasted by the judge on the house-door. All their gold will go to the judicial treasury. They should be made aware of this impending trouble. Conveying our prayer, you should guard their material riches."

"This is a difficult task. Who sent you here? Is it His Excellency or Veerabhadra Trisanu?"

"Neither. It is Bhima Bhatta. Basically your subject. His daughter-in-law may not recognise you. True. But Bhima Bhatta's wife will. She will believe your words."

"Persuading women is a tough job, Tarkshya!"

"Tough for people like us, but I don't believe it is tough for chronologically old and knowledge-wise old great grandfatherly personages like you."

"Shall I ask Trisanu?"

"Whatever Trisanu has to say is in the notice pasted on Bhima Bhatta's house-door. The women know it as well. They have to shell out hundred and five *varahas* as penalty inside three days. If this amount has to reach the court, the womenfolk have to part with their jewellery. They are not willing to do it. If the house is searched in three days, all their gold will go to the court. This is undesirable. You can do this if you will. Ask the women to sell the gold in the market and then pay the necessary amount to the court out of the proceeds. Or let them along with their gold go over to Tamralepa today. I am sure if the women go and meet Bhima Bhatta and Vrisha Bhatta in the prison, they would also suggest the same course of action. There is no other third way out. You should give up the Ayodhye house. Are you not convinced this is the right thing to do?'

Devaraju suddenly got up and wrapping the *peta* round his head, called out to Vatsaraja who was upstairs.

Vatsaraja was quite familiar with his father's hasty nature. He took his own time coming down the stairs.

"Come fast! Tarkshya has come. Listen to what he says quickly. I will visit the toilet." He unwound the *peta* before walking in.

"Listen, Vatsaraja! I will tell you in brief,.."

"Tell me slowly. Our father will take time, his is an unnecessarily dilatory procedure in making ablutions after easing nature!"

Tarkshya told him every detail.

"Is that all, fellow?! Every time you come you bring some or other news of war. The bones that had loosened in the Shravasti war are still aching."

"There is another war coming up, be warned! Eat almonds and saffron from today and get strong. Do a hundred sun-salutations."

"What kind of a war? There is no hint."

"What other war? Does someone like you need to be told? Divodasa is mustering his army on the Magadha border. After the fall of Magadha he will swallow up Champadesha. We have to wait and see whose the next turn is: Ayodhye's or Pragjothisha's."

"Who told you this?"

"Why should anyone tell me? Why do you think Divodasa put his brother in prison? We thought all along that the Kashi people didn't know anything except the study of the Vedas.The Gaya they had lost we won for them. We will now get to experience the fruit of that benevolent act of ours."

"What is in store for us in the future?"

"The next commander will either be you or Veerasena."

"What about you?"

"I am Tarkshya. I will be around as long as Purukutsani is alive. I will breathe my last before she does if god does me a merciful favour."

Devaraja came out in the meantime, wrapping the *peta* around his head. Vatsaraja ran upstairs and changed his shirt and *dhotra*. Veerasena rode his horse a few steps behind their chariot. Tarkshya took a few steps along with them, thinking that it was not auspicious for three people to

undertake such an important task. "Tell the women that the two Bhattas have been imprisoned," he breathed before walking toward the palace.

Taking a shortcut, Veerasena conveyed the news to the women. The women who had already been weary from wailing, broke into another spasm of uproarious weeping. Veerasena stood there for a while.

The chariot arrived in the meanwhile. Devaraja drove away the people that had gathered there before initiating talks.

Bhima Bhatta's wife was a clever woman. Her personality hadn't found expression because of Bhima Bhatta's troublesome behaviour. Her shrewdness found the light of day now. She rejected outright the idea of paying the penalty by selling her gold. She also refused to go and see her husband in the prison. "If you are prepared to give away your gold, you go, I won't come!" she told her daughter-in-law. The daughter-in-law too refused to part with her gold. Why should we give away the gold that has to reach our children because of the whims and fancies of our husbands, they argued. "Why should people like us fight the king?," they said pointblank. "He has been helpful to us. Our husbands are ungrateful." They were worried about the house search.

They felt happy when someone said, "We will arrange for your stay in Tamralepa."

"We will set out early in the morning. Daytime may be hot but we won't have trouble from thieves and robbers during the day."

"Vatsaraja will escort you along with six horsemen. If you still have fears, you can keep your gold in my vault." offered Devaraja.

"No, Let our gold be with us" she asserted, a stern streak in her voice.

"All right. The chariot will come to your house before the first cockcrow. You leave before the neighbours are up. We may be in for trouble if someone reports this to the chief justice." Saying this Devaraja walked home along with his son. Veerasena went to Tarkshya to report.

Chayadevi was confident that Devaraju would organise her stay in Tamralepa. However knowing as she did his habits, she wouldn't trust him with her gold.

She bolted the room from inside. She packed up her vessels and other stuff. She cooked food for the morrow's journey in the night itself and bundled up the food. "I don't trust you with the gold." She told her daughter-in-law. "You don't trust me either. Each of us is responsible for our gold. I will teach you how to pack up gold." So saying she slept right on the mat that night. She got up early the next morning, at the *brahmi* hour, had her bath, ate a little food. Then she washed two mud-pots. She wrapped her gold in two castor leaves. She placed two more castor leaves on it before tying it up securely with a rag. She told the daughter-in-law also to do the same thing. She proceeded to put the bundle of food in another vessel before placing two castor leaves on it and securing it with a rag. "Keep your mud-pot in your lap and I will keep mine in my lap. We will eat from the bundle that is there in that vessel. We will have to see we don't lose hold of our pots. I am a villagewoman. I learnt this from my mother. Thieves may steal the vessel. Mud-pots inspire fear."

The mud-pots, objects of *madi* purity and cleanness, were on the oven when the chariot arrived. After everything else was loaded, the two women got on the chariot along

with the mud-pots and kept them in their laps. The elder woman took a look at the house before leaving. She made sure once again that everything including the torn mat and the broken broom had been loaded. She fastened a broken wax-filled lock on to the house door. "My indebtedness to this house ceases!" she exclaimed, wept a bit, placed some turmeric, vermilion and rice grains on the threshold, then got on the chariot and sat by the daughter-in-law. The child was still sleeping.

A couple of people who were sleeping on the mud-and-stone seat built around a tree woke up at the sound of the moving chariot, but went quickly back to sleep wrapping the sheets around them. The horsemen were silent. The skilled charioteer drove the chariot in such a way that the vessels on top didn't make noise, the brooms and torn pillows didn't fall off and the women didn't get tired. There were three horsemen on either side of the chariot, with Vatsaraja coming behind as the seventh escort. After it crossed the town limits, the four-horsed chariot began to run at a fast clip.

* * * *

The twosome who had been pushed into prison was in a jovial mood for a couple of hours. The thrill of slapping the judge smack on his cheek still circulated in Vrisha's veins. Bhima Bhatta, who had seen it, sang his son's praises, "It is worthwhile having fathered you! You are a worthy son!" He hugged his son out of pride. Since it was afternoon, the servants started carrying food for the prisoners on dried *muttuga* leaves. This was a temporary room. Even if one went past it, none would look in and come to Bhatta. Bhatta would shout, "Hee! Shoo!, ShuShuu!" in an attempt to catch the servants' attention.

But none turned to look. They would walk carefully right past his room, carrying the used leaves one upon the other.

"You go ahead and eat if the food comes in." said Vrisha Bhatta. "I haven't had my bath."

"What kind of a bath one could have in the prison? Let the leaf come. I will gobble it up! I haven't had my bath either. I am Bhima Bhatta the Veda specialist and *ghanapathi*!"

"I know about your *ghanapatha*. Your guru is Lalitambe!" taunted Vrisha.

"Which Lalitambe?! Who told you, you unworthy wretch!?" yelled Bhima Bhatta.

"I know everything. I have kept everything inside me because of your reputation and honour in the Brahmin neighbourhood. I know how badly you have treated my mother."

"Did I make your mother suffer? You blithering idiot!" screamed Bhima Bhatta as he flew at Vrisha and struck him on his back. Vrisha's shoulder hurt. "I am keeping quiet because I should not hit my own father. Go lie down in some corner quietly, Mr *Ghanapathi*! Be careful, if you strike me again,."

"What will you do? You do whatever you want, Let me see!" the father came back at the son, wanting to hit him again. Vrisha Bhatta got up, twirled his father's arm, and struck his head lightly so as not to cause any pain. That was precisely the mistake. If the strike had caused pain, Bhima Bhatta's attention would have turned that way. But affronted, anger burnt up in Bhima Bhatta like a faggot in a tempest. "My worthy son! He is coming to hit me!" he screamed, beating his chest. The sentinel came running and getting to know what had happened, took Bhima Bhatta by

the arm and tried to drag him out, saying, "You two shouldn't stay in the same room."

Shama Bhatta came running in the meantime. He had learnt that they had been imprisoned. "I should talk to them," he told the guardsman.

"You talk to them separately. Because they are put up in the same room, this young man is bashing the old man," he said.

"They are father and son. They are in prison for the same reason."

"All right. But they are squabbling."

"It is all right. I will console them."

"What consolation will you do? We haven't got our meals." shouted Bhima Bhatta.

The guardsman submitted: "The meal will come. This is a temporary room. Your food will come after the people who were imprisoned before you are given food."

"I am hungry. Give me first."

"That would be against prison rules. First the permanent prisoners and then the temporary ones."

Both the *Bhattas* were delighted to hear they were temporary prisoners. "Does 'temporary' mean they would be released in a couple of days?" asked Shama Bhatta.

"That is the discretionary pleasure of the judge."

"All right. Don't separate father and son. I will see that they don't fight."

The security guard locked the room and went off.

"Were you insane that you attacked Veerabhadra Trisanu? You were fortunate. The guardsmen caught you. If Trisanu flew into a rage, he could have reduced you to pulp. He is a wrestler of Ayodhye. He has the reputation of

being undefeated in the whole of India. He brought name and fame to Ayodhye. How will people like you be proud of Ayodhye, the blood-sucking leeches that you are? If he had caught you in one of those wrestling holds of his, you would have taken to bed for fifteen days. He has given up wrestling after he became a judge and a mayor. How could you raise your hand to take on a physique such as his?"

"I could do it because he was sitting." Vrisha admitted. "If he had stood up, my hand wouldn't have reached his face."

"You are very clever. You now rot in the jail for six months for attacking the judge."

"What about the injustice done to us.?"

"No matter what the injustice, you could have gone to His Excellency. You don't have the face to stand before him, do you? When you went last time to ask for a loan, didn't it become a charitable gift? And by this kind of stupidity you converted it into a loan yourself. Got into a prison. 'Meal!, meal!' you would always bawl without any consideration for your wife and kids. You don't feel ashamed? When you are born a man, you should be aware of your position and power."

"What do you say I should do now?"

"What do I have to say? I will give you whatever help you need from outside. You tell me. I will do it for the pride about Rigvedins. I don't have any respect left for you. You are not my friend. I couldn't contain myself, I ran here driven by the concern of an old friendship. Here father and son are battling it out! You swear by god and tell me: have you had a thought of concern about the women?"

Both thought about it for a while. They nodded their heads, the nod expressing an emphatic NO.

"You are not human beings, you are animals. You do whatever you want. I am leaving!"

He was on the point of leaving when Vrisha Bhatta said, "Wait, Shama Bhatta! Let mother and Chayadevi leave Ayodhye the same day with their gold and go to Tamralepa. We have our dilapidated house there. Let them be there till we come there."

"I am happy that atleast this much sense has dawned on you, Praise god!"

"How much would twenty *tolas* of gold fetch?" asked Bhima Bhatta.

"Father! You keep mum. None of your word will prevail from now on. Let us settle in different houses after we are released from prison. Let no kind of relationship exist between us."

Bhima Bhatta sagged to the ground, aghast at having to hear such talk from his own son at his age.

"I don't want either to be having anything to say to Bhima Bhatta" Shama Bhatta submitted. "Vrisha! Shall I tell you something?"

"What is it?"

"It was you who struck Trisanu. It was he who reviled him. The first thing to be done is you should beg his pardon, and then leave the decision to him."

"If we beg his pardon, will he release us?" asked Bhima Bhatta.

"Bhima Bhatta! Don't you feel you have made a mistake?"

"We are gods-on-earth. Whatever we do is by itself right."

"If that is what you say, you rot here. I won't talk to you. Vrisha! What do you say?"

"Yes, in the rush of anger I did it. All this is the king's rogue plan. What offence did poor Trisanu do?"

"His Excellency gave you a donation when you went to ask for a loan. Wasn't it an evil design?"

"That is not donation, but agreement, a threat!"

"All right. I take leave."

"It is beyond me to beg His Excellency's pardon."

"If you were human, you would have fallen at His Excellency's feet. I did that on your behalf. Let's not talk about it for now. You will seek Trisanu's pardon if at all you are human and if you feel in your heart of hearts that you have wronged him. Why should I bother? What I have got so far is enough. You are still angry with me for taking you to the king, getting you a donation and to suit your arrogance expressed our gratitude to him for his help. You still slight and sneer at me. God has created such ungrateful creatures as well. And he has ruled that we live in such a world. What can one do but to live? But listen! The bond of obligation between you and your father ceases from today. I don' t want to see you in my house. I will convey your message to the womenfolk in your house. That is the last service that I am doing you. Is that understood?"

"But then who will convey our request for pardon to Trisanu?"

"Let the your request for pardon remain with me. Why should I see Trisanu and incur his wrath? That bond ceases here and now. If you will, tell him when he comes here."

"When is he coming?"

"He will come twice in a week, in the evening. Why should I tell you even that?" Saying this, Shama Bhatta went off in a hurry, content.

Shama Bhatta went to Bhima Bhatta's place in the evening and rapped on the door thrice. The work of packing up things was in full swing. Nobody opened the door. He went back home and stretching his legs, lay down.

In the evening came Trisanu on his usual round of enquiring after the welfare of prisoners. "My Lord! Your Legal Majesty! Mr. Righteous!. pardon!.. pardon!.. pardon!" bewailed the two Bhattas as they rammed their heads against the pillar.

Turning back, Trisanu walked over.

"Trisanu! We have committed a crime. Please grant us pardon," they cried stretching their hands in between the door rods and touching the floor in salutation.

"Vrisha, You have escaped. I don't know what would have happened if I got you!"

"Mine has been a grave crime. You have yourself given us three days. We are caught in here. Please grant us pardon and release us!" Vrisha put in a request.

"Vrisha! The wrestler from Kampilya was here fifteen years ago for a wrestling bout with me. His head was three times as big as yours. He gripped the ground soil and stayed put so as to weasel out of the *savari* hold I had caught him in. I lifted him effortlessly four times and flung him on to the ground. Yet he lay gripping the ground and wouldn't admit defeat. I thought the fizz was going out of the fight. There were only two ways out of the situation. The death hold or. If I caught him in a death hold, his testicles would have swollen, forcing him to admit defeat. But he was still a young greenhorn. I don't know if he was married. Out of sympathy for him, I caught his testicles tight with one hand. The blood coagulated and he lay unconscious. He was here with our royal physician for

treatment for six months after which he was up and about. Then he returned to Kampilya. Now he is fine, with his family, house and fields. I paid for his medical and massaging expenses. I also paid half the price of the field he bought at Kampilya. You are of course a piddling man of straw, a runt! I would have ground you like a bedbug. You somehow escaped. Do you know why my servants stood surrounding you?"

"No, I don't."

"That was to protect you from me! My wife has given them standing instruction to the effect that whenever such a situation arose, the servants should surround the offender cutting off my access to him. Do you know why Queen Purukutsani made me the Chief Justice?"

"No, we don't, Trisanu!"

"My wrestling prowess caused so many deaths. I used to follow the rules of the wrestling bouts strictly. That goddess of a queen appointed me as the judge to get me away from wrestling. There are scholars to look after law. I am only a judge, the one who delivers judgements. I don't know how to write. I agreed to this just to do what Her Excellency bid me to do. I salute her. Which king in which kingdom would assign the job of a judge to an illiterate? Has there been injustice done by me? Can you give me atleast one example?"

"My Lord! I am extremely sad that I insulted you."

"How can you insult me? You can't! Fifty traders and women worthy of respect, whom know about my previous life, paid me a delighted visit at home. They were thankful that I didn't get Vrisha's midgety head. God protected him. They said they would crack two hundred coconuts in worship to Goddess Vasanthika Devi. This is to

congratulate the servants who saved you from me and not for the fact that you are alive. They have arranged a dinner of sweet *huggi*. You are sitting like two houseflies on such a pail of vibrant delight of milk that is Ayodhye!"

"We will leave Ayodhye for good and go to Tamralepa."

"You can go, by all means. That is your will. None of us likes you to be here."

"Will we be released from prison?"

"You have to be punished for your offence. You spend two days in prison. I will restrict your days of imprisonment to two days."

"We are grateful. Just one thing, Trisanu! Let's not talk about law any longer. You please tell us once that you have pardoned us from the bottom of your heart."

"You are quick of temper. You did an indiscretion in the rush of anger. Ask your father what he was upto."

"We are separate now. We are no longer related. You please tell me about me."

"I have pardoned you."

Vrisha was released after two days. They slammed the door shut on Bhima Bhatta saying they had no orders to release him.

Even as the old father bewailed piteously, "Boy, Vrisha!", Vrisha Bhatta walked off to Devaraja's house without looking back. "Why the bond of obligation with this house?" he argued to himself, and so he didn't go home. Devaraja wasn't at home. He saw Vatsaraja. "Vatsaraja! Will you arrange to send me to Tamralepa?" he asked him.

"The womenfolk of your household have gone to Tamralepa. I have seen them to the place myself. One of your housewalls has collapsed. The rest of the house is fine

and sturdy. I will arrange for their stay elsewhere, I said. But your mother didn't agree. I had the house mucked out, swept and smeared with cowdung wash. I have also arranged for a workman to build the wall. A steer cart has come today with a load of paddy. You can go back in it. Why, have you had enough of Ayodhye?"

"It is our fate."

"It is our arrogance. You created disputes in everything, spread animosity, bringing us a bad name. Our father acquired merit for himself by bringing your father here. Nothing would stir from its place during Purukutsani's time. Now someone from Kashi has to come to resolve this dispute."

"I am the blockhead! I got deceived by my respect for father."

"Atleast this much of sense and prudence has dawned on. Aren't you going to your house?"

"Whose house? What is there for me to go there? What will accost me there is the notice that sent us to prison."

"What could the notice do? You brought it upon yourself. Are you a kid yet? You are a thirty-year-old big-boned bloke. Don't sit back thinking the mistake was entirely your father's. If you can, cultivate land. If you can't, join my army: War is going to break out in two or three years. We will need soldiers. Stay back and get lost in your house if you are bothered about questions of *madi* purity and such things. But don't come back to Ayodhye. Did you have your meal?"

"No, I didn't."

"Have your meal with me and go to sleep. Farmers will come at midnight. Get on the cart along with them. You can reach your town tomorrow evening."

Devaraja had finished half his meal along with his grandson. His daughter-in-law Sundaridevi was serving. Vatsaraja entered the house with Vrisha Bhatta in front announcing, "A guest has come."

"Come in! Who is it?" asked the old man, looking intently at the guest.

"Vrisha Bhatta, the royal priest!" replied Vatsaraja.

"Come, come, Vrisha Bhatta! Your father Bhima Bhatta is my close friend. Vatsaraja is back after seeing your wife and children to Tamralepa."

"Bhima Bhatta is thinking of going with farmers tonight."

"I thought he was imprisoned."

"He was released this evening," said Vrisha Bhatta by way of a clarificatory response.

"Whatever it is, you are the son of a big friend of mine. Come! Have your meal!" said Devaraja, taking in water from his cupped palm even as he jabbered some *mantras*, which signalled the end of his meal. His younger brother had already finished his meal and left.

Sundaridevi brought two plates of food.

"Your father and mine are pimping friends. Unfortunately I didn't show as much love of father as you did." said Vatsaraja, smiling. Sundari flashed a smile too.

Vrisha Bhatta finished his meal quietly and rose. Having heard his father's unsavoury stories, his mind had been hurt. Besides, calling him 'royal priest' was an affront.

The whole world is vibrant with happiness. Only I am a housefly. No, I shouldn't leave it like this. I should make Ayodhye see and believe my worth, he said to himself.

After the meal Vrisha walked toward Devaraja's room to see him. Vatsaraja signaled to him and had him come up to the balcony.

"I should bid goodbye to Devaraja." said Vrisha.

"This is not the time. There is no rule about who should be there in his room now. I haven't kept track either." said Vatsaraja, making him sleep in a room upstairs.

Seeing farmers arrive at midnight he woke up Vrisha and had him get on the cart.

* * * *

Over there in the prison, Bhima Bhatta didn't stop begging Trisanu, "Pardon!.. Pardon! Mr righteousness incarnate!" "It was Vrisha who did the striking. Why imprison me?" he argued. Trisanu never stopped to listen to him. After a month a guardsman opened the lock saying, "You can go!" Bhima Bhatta came home cursing His Excellency, Trisanu and the sentinel who opened the lock and let him out. There was a government lock and seal on the door. Not knowing initially where to go, and exclaiming, "Exceptionally allowed conduct!", he found himself heading toward Shama Bhatta's house. "The bond of an earlier birth is ended!" exclaimed Shama Bhatta as he came running. "Please come! When did they release you?" he asked, delighted. This was enough for Bhima Bhatta. He finished his meal there. "I went to their place thrice to convey Vrisha Bhatta's message, but Chayadevi didn't open the door. I went again the next day. They had locked the door and gone somewhere. I retraced my steps thinking that she had gone to her maternal home. Where is Vrisha Bhatta?"

"They released him in three days although it was he who slapped Trisanu, but they kept me for as long as three months."

"Who doesn't like the company of good people? All right. Be it what it might, where did Vrisha Bhatta go?"

"We would know if we ask Devaraja. We had you ask mother and wife to go to Tamralepa, didn't we?"

"But that message didn't reach them."

"We have our house there. Neither he nor Vrisha can go there without Sri Devaraja's help. You have to cross three rivers."

"Shall we see Devaraja?"

"Not now. I haven't any money on me now. My dear son kept thirteen *varahas* with himself. In my hurry to follow him I didn't put on my shirt. As usual my wife seems to have lifted the sundry coins from the pocket. I can't see Devaraja without a shirt."

"Please put on my shirt."

"It is not a question just of a shirt. I have moved about with Devaraja like his equal on streets, in brothels and houses.. How can I go to him in this degenerate state?"

"You put a noose around your own neck with such arrogant behaviour. Can't we ask Devaraja for some loan?"

"By the way I have lent the beggars sixty *pai* each. Are they still coming to the temple?"

"They have become rich. They can give change upto one *varaha*."

"Can we get one *varaha* each from them?"

"Bhatta! that is their capital. They owe you just sixty *pai* each. They might give at the most one rupee. But they won't give you!"

"All right give them give only that much. Will you get it from them? That would be great help."

"Anyway you have learnt the word 'help'. Let's see."

In the evening Shama Bhatta went to the temple alone. He called the beggars' leader and requested him, "Bhima Bhatta who lent you sixty *pai* each has come. He has fallen into bad times. He wants to return to his native village. He has no money for daily expenses. See how much money you can rustle up from the loanees."

"How much does he expect?"

"It would suffice even if we get one rupee from each of them. He doesn't have the face to see you himself."

He went round and collected thirty-six rupees.

"All right, man! It has been a great help."

"Not all the loanees are here. I could get only this much. Excuse me!"

"This is enough," breathed Shama Bhatta before trotting off home.

"What happened? You returned so soon. I bet they said no."

"Had you had the helpful attitude that beggars have, you would have been swimming in money," averred Shama Bhatta, counting thirty-six rupees. " 'Not all loanees have come' the beggars' leader said. He asked to be excused."

Bhima Bhatta was delighted to see the money. "Some of them may come tomorrow. Can't we get some tomorrow?"

"I won't come tomorrow. You go if you want. You better be satisfied with what you have got and hit the path home."

Bhima Bhatta had his night meal and left the house. There was no trace of him till the first cocks crowed the beginning of another day.

He returned in the morning, having squandered ten of those rupees.

This annoyed and put Shama Bhatta off. 'Get up. Have your bath," he told Bhima Bhatta. He went out and hiring a cart, had it parked in front of the house. After Bhima Bhatta had his bath, Shama Bhatta arranged for Bhima Bhatta to have his meal first. "Why Should I eat so early?" asked Bhima Bhatta. "You leave for home. I have fixed a cart to take you to your village. It is standing in front of the house. The hire charge is fifteen rupees." replied Shama Bhatta, a stern edge to his voice. "Get on the cart as soon as you finish your meal."

Bhima Bhatta didn't say a word in return. He ate his meal quickly, washed his hand before getting on the steer cart.

TRASADASYU-7

About this time came some delectable news to Ayodhye. Trasadasyu had a boy baby. His Excellency recovered and was up and about. Had I not become the king, the Ahichhatra king wouldn't have given his daughter in marriage to me, he told himself falling into a meditation. I shouldn't behave so as to cause any injustice to her. I am indeed the king when the child is born. It is my duty to hand the kingdom over to my son in one piece. With these feelings he started to take more interest in the affairs of the state.

He named his son 'Triksha', saying his father's name was Triksha. He thought he shouldn't name him after his guru Tarkshya when the guru was still alive. Tarkshya's delight knew no bounds.

Her Excellency Queen Purukutsani came over herself to Ayodhye from Amaru for the occasion of putting the child into the cradle. Although a bit on the obese side, the popular queen's face glowed with the usual lustre. She had given up using turmeric powder on her forehead after the death of Simha Bhatta. She felt happy that Trasadasyu himself had chosen the name Traksha for her grandson. Sugar and sweets were distributed to children. The child was brought in a procession, complete with all musical fanfare, to the Avanthika Devi temple and the mother put him at the feet of the goddess.

The queen then proceeded to the mango grove after spending a few days in Ayodhye. Takshya accompanied her.

Her Excellency was upbeat till she reached the grove.

But she fell ill as soon as she reached the hut. She sat up feeling comforted after sleeping for a *prahara*. "I have forgotten my box in the chariot," she told Tarkshya. Tarkshya went and brought it for her. She gulped a couple of pills from the box before saying, "Bring me some water." She drank some water and went to sleep again. But sleep didn't come to her.

"Shall I bring a physician, Your Excellency?"

"No, don't! Come sit by me!" she patted the bed, the pat indicating the place she wanted him seated on.

Tarkshya stepped up a tad hesitantly and stood by the bed. "May I ask what is wrong? I also know a couple of herbs."

"What shall I tell you, Tarkshya? I can tell you if you sit by me, here" Tarkshya sat where she indicated.

"Is it easy to live a family life with a crazy man for six months?"

"That is exactly what I want to ask. Why did you take that decision?"

"I didn't think there would be Simha Bhatta and Kripa Devi in Amaru when I went there."

"Actually I took them to Sage Devadema when I saw indiscretion and imprudence being perpetrated by the Bhatta in Ayodhye. I thought they should be away."

"The old man begged for the alms of love twelve times in the first ten days of my stay there. He fell at my feet. Wept. I asked His Worship Devadema in the end. 'He is mad.' he said. 'You won't get attracted to him in that state.' There is no question at all of attraction before me. It never was. Somehow a delusion arose in me. And that was that if he had gone crazy because of me, I should cure it. On the

very first day of our meeting his brain experienced a shock in the frenzy of excitement and there was bleeding. Then whatever the feeling - anger, revenge or hate - he took it on me. His Worship kept telling me that he wouldn't live long. Once when I declined, the old man tried to wring my neck before doing it to his satisfaction. He refused to give up his hatred against me although I tried to wheedle him. He thought till his dying day that I had done some black magic against him. Kripa Devi still has that feeling. My test by fire is over. I merely exist now. The Amaru hermitage has become repulsive because of that experience with him."

"Has Sage Devadema given you any medicine?"

"Yes, he has. He has taken a lot of care. But my own body causes disgust in me because the old fogey handled it."

"I feel that a dark cloud has mantled all this enthusiasm, celebration and naming ceremony. Your Excellency should again take up the leadership."

"What kind of a dark cloud?" The queen sat up.

"King Ketumanta came here. He conducted the enquiry very well. He gave us seminars and discourses on religion and so on. When he came here, he had handed over charge to his brother Divodasa. I didn't know it. He met his destruction right before my eyes. No matter what care I take, my mind doesn't raise to your level. I can achieve small trivial things. I don't have the integral vision to steer the ship of the state. Her Excellency had taken ill right at this moment!"

"Tell me what Divodasa did."

"He will topple the Magadha empire in a month. He can then easily annex the Champa kingdom. He can then turn to Kampilya and Dasharna. Or else he might be

thinking of swallowing Ayodhye first and then turning to Kampilya and Ahichhatra, who knows. Things will become clear only when Magadha falls."

"Do you feel Magadha is going to fall?"

"He has done enough preparation, both within and without."

"Have you cautioned Magadha?"

Tarkshya felt again the lack of a political vision in him. "No, I haven't, Your Majesty! We don't have a strong relationship with Magadha. Kashi is close to us. I kept quiet because in case Divodasa came to know that I had sent warning signals to Magadha, his eyes might fall on us."

"Tarkshya, god has vouchsafed you a good intellect. But He has given you a little less of this." Her Excellency averred, patting her heart.

"Am I empty of heart, Your Serene Majesty?"

"Let us see, come! Simha Bhatta has shown the distaste of sexual intercourse. I will concede that you have a heart if you can show me its delicious dulcitude!" said the excited queen even as she wound her arms around his neck and planted loud and smacking kisses on him.

Seeing that Tarkshya was still worried, she went on: "You can see about politics tomorrow. Your father's name and my grandson's name are the same. Your name has become a part of Ayodhye's history. You are still worried about your retirement. You forget it! Become a man! Make me also a woman!" So saying she put out the lights.

When the lights are out, there wouldn't be any difference between a Pakshma Rani, the whore and a *maha-rani*, the queen, would there?

Tarkshya dished out sweet raw delight, gave Her Excellency the best possible gratification, doing it to her in all possible ways blending dexterity with subtlety, and what was important, without making her feel slighted.

Sound sleep seized the contented queen at three o'clock in the night. Tarkshya stood up and walked away to his room, saying to himself 'This was my service to the queen!'

* * * *

It might have been early morning. Tarkshya had had his bath and had sat down for his pooje when a messenger from Ayodhye came on horseback and entered Tarkshya's room.

"My name is Mahaparshwa. Veerasena Guptha has sent a message."

Tarkshya looked this side and that before he had the messenger sit by him. "Whisper it into my ears!" The security guards were far away.

"My Lord! News has come that there has been a fight between the Kashi army and the Haihaya army on the Magadha border, and as a result, the Kashi army has scattered. King Trasadasyu has sent for you."

Stunned, Tarkshya finished his *pooje* quickly. "Stay here. I can't come without informing the queen," he said before he walked away to the queen's room. Her Excellency hadn't yet got up. Her eyes were closed. Tarkshya stood there, wringing his hands. "Has any news come from the Haihaya king? I heard the clip-clop of a horse," asked the queen without opening her eyes.

"Yes, Your Excellency! The Kashi army was mustering on the western Magadha border. Now there has been a fight between the Kashi army and the Haihaya army, and as a result the Kashi army has scattered. That is the news. King

Trasadasyu has sent for me. Since it is so near I thought Her Excellency might agree to come to Ayodhye, and so have the messenger still standing here."

"All right. Tell him to tell the king that both of us would be there. Let's set out in one hour."

"How did the queen expect some news from the Haihayas?" Tarkshya fell to wondering as he got into an intrigued spell of brooding. The queen is always a step ahead of me!

* * * *

The queen took quite a while, having her bath, doing her *pooje* and sprucing up herself. Tarkshya drove the chariot quite fast. "Why this hurry?' asked the queen. "Drive slowly. I am not the former Purukutsani. I am now a grandmother, you know?"

"Your Excellency wrought a miracle yet again!" exuded Tarkshya, driving the cart slowly. "Did you know beforehand of the Haihayas coming?"

"There is no miracle in this, Tarkshya! About four months back a messenger from the Haihayas had come directly to Amaru, disguised as a bellmetalsmith. The Haihaya king had sent a secret message to me. 'In case they raided Kashi, would we oppose them, joining Kashi?' was what they wanted to know. Nobody in Aryavarta knows about how cannily we misled the Nepal king. But the Haihayas somehow know about it. They were now in a dilemma. Everyone knows about our war with and victory over Kashi. That we helped the Kashi king in his fight with Gaya only Bhadrasenya the Haihaya king knows. He was intrigued whether Kashi was our ally or foe. These are what you did, Tarkshya! They thought the success belonged to me and so they sent the messenger to Amaru."

"What did you say, Your Excellency!"

"All are our friends. It was the Kashi king who mounted an attack without any reason. Ayodhye can defend itself. Besides it wouldn't like to covet other kingdoms. I said in case the Haihayas won over Kashi, Ayodhye would expect their friendship, no more."

"I have heard of the Haihayas, but I don't know much about them."

"That is a peculiar race. Their kingdom is in Pratishtana. Brothers would all be together in synergic harmony. When the elder brother becomes the king, he makes the other brothers kings of other kingdoms. He gives military help to his brothers to raid and annex other kingdoms. You have thus the Haihayas ruling in kingdoms such as the Yadu kingdom, Malava, Utkala, Anarta, karusha, Koshambi. The Haihayas in Champa could have easily informed them about our friction with Nepal. Their forefathers have fought big wars and have lost some and won some. Now they think their own people should be ruling everywhere."

"Why would they want Kashi?"

"That is their ignorance. Kashi is a religious place, and they think if they conquer it, they would have in the palm of their hands the centre of Aryavarta. The reality is different. The centre of Aryavarta is Hastinapura. But why should we tell this to them?"

"Bhadrasenya is a man of substance?"

"Many kingdoms along the Narmada belong to the Haihayas. Whichever Haihaya king wants to conquer a kingdom by fighting a war, the other Haihaya kings help him achieve it. Now the Narmada shoreline bristles with Haihaya kings. One has to go only to Dandakaranya to

build a new kingdom. So they harbour the wish of raiding old kingdoms. Kashi is quite fertile. They want to annex it now. Desire has limits. Racial ambition knows no limits."

Chatting like this, travelling at a deliberate unhurried pace, they reached the palace at about 3 o' clock in the morning.

Trasadasyu had got together four army commanders, four premiers and Veerasena. Fidgety, angry and wringing his hands, he was pacing up and down. "Why so late?" he shouted the moment he saw Tarkshya. Tarkshya put his finger on his lips, suggesting that Her Excellency was behind.

The queen entered, gently rubbing her saree-end. Everyone rose suddenly. Enraged further by this, Trasadasyu flopped down on the throne.

"We could have reached a *prahara* back. I wasn't keeping well. It is I who told Tarkshya to drive the chariot slowly." She walked straight to the throne. Not knowing what to do when he learnt that Her Majesty was coming, Veerasena had a high seat placed beside the throne. Without looking that side, Her Excellency patted Trasadasyu on his back as she said, "I will conduct the meeting today. You sit there." Trasadasyu got on the high seat, vacating the throne. The queen sat solemnly and deliberately down on the throne.

"What is the news that has come in?"

The senior commander related the fight that came about between the armies of Kashi and the Haihayas and the fact of how Divodasa's army scattered.

"Where did it happen?"

"There is a thick jungle off the border of the Kalanja kingdom. Divodasa's vanguard army contingent had

mustered there. The Magadha border is somewhere there. The news is that the Haihaya army came from behind and drove away the Kashi army."

"Why did the Kashi army collect there?"

"It seems they are driven by the desire to topple the Magadha kingdom." submitted the senior commander.

"I will tell you what I know, Listen!" Her Excellency took up the word. "This is an accident. The Kashi king had got his army there to occupy the high altitude territories of Pataliputra and Girivraja of the Magadha kingdom. Bhadrasenya the Haihaya king had planned one year back to occupy Kashi. He had sent a messenger several months back to Amaru. That was to find out if Ayodhye would oppose them if they mounted a raid on Kashi. I told them that Ayodhye wouldn't wreck its internal peace trying to support other kingdoms. I had also warned them not to eye Ayodhye. Now with this friction Divodasa will wake up and face the Haihayas with all his strength. The Haihayas are strong too. The Haihaya brothers will send contingents of their much-liked fighters. We don't want Kashi. Even when we conquered Kashi, we didn't like to rule them. Instead we crowned the deceased king's minor son the king. They're smart but weak. Even when Nepal attacked them, Ketumanta the Kashi king sat quiet. Now his younger brother is ruling and has incarcerated his elder brother. The news of the Haihaya attack will reach him. He wouldn't know the purpose. War will be waged with full force. What would be Ayodhye's role and what should be our attitude? Let us deliberate these questions now."

"Why didn't you tell us about the Haihaya messenger?" Trasadasyu's question was testy.

Her Excellency sat quiet.

"Tell us." Trasadasyu insisted, petulance standing out by a mile in his voice.

"I didn't because of a fear about you. That is, although your single-handed capture of Shambarasura compelled admiration for you in me, it also brought home to me your impetuous and rash nature. You are the one who conducts the state. My fear was that if you came to know about it, you might bind the state to some reckless decision of yours. Bravery is beneficial in some matters. In crucial big issues, individual bravery will not benefit the state"

"Tarkshya is there to contain my rashness, isn't there? Did your faith in me die away?"

"You are the one who takes decisions. Others, Tarkshya or somebody, have to try to implement those decisions. But I am all praise for your untramelled courage. Had it not been for Tarkshya's advice, however, you, carried away by the citizens' full-throated appreciation of your act, would have gone for a public parade of Shambarasura, wouldn't you?"

"Yes!" softpedalled Trasadasyu, putting his face down.

Her Majesty left it at that.

"It is certain that Divodasa will attack from Kashi and confront the Haihayas. Where the war will be waged then and how it will tell on the Ayodhye border are questions that need to be discussed. What is your calculation?" The queen looked at the chief commander, the old grandfatherly Kshemaraja. "We should be prepared for every eventuality. Since Divodasa's main target is Magadha, the probability of the two armies confronting each other on the banks of the Ganga a little distance south of the Ayodhye border seems distinct. It is less likely to turn toward our direction. We can't however say anything in war. We should be on our guard."

Vikramasimha who was the eighth premier had risen to be the fourth premier by virtue of praising Trasadasyu's bravery incessantly to the skies. He was a skilled talker. It was his habit to pose as a representative of the younger generation by butting in the elders' discussions. "How would it be if we stopped the Haihayas in their tracks?" he posed.

"What would be the advantage of such a manouvre?" asked the chief premier, who had a personal distaste for him.

"I have heard that Divodasa is a bellicose man," the fourth premier rattled off. "We can earn Divodasa's friendship by stopping the Haihayas, can't we?"

"We should keep an important thing in mind when forming attitudes." Kshemaraja weighed in. "If Kashi loses, then the war will end right there. If on the other hand the Haihayas lose, the war will not come to an end. The Haihaya brothers will send another army and start fresh hostilities, and they will continue till they win. But once they win, they will not be able to govern. This is the fate of all Haihaya dynasties. The earliest Haihaya kings conquered Ayodhye once upon a time, and ruled it. Then the Ikshvaku race established itself once again. I can show ten such examples. Their victory comes but as the beginning of failure. Both these kings have got aggressive to further their personal ambition by building kingdoms. There will be a big war. If the Kashi king loses, then the war will end right there. If on the other hand the Haihayas are vanquished, there will be another attack in the very next year. You can consider this as a rule. We have to shape our attitude and policy according to this."

"Does that mean we should desire a Haihaya victory?" the fourth premier interposed again.

"I am not saying that. I only sketched the background."

"Kshemaraja has drawn our attention to three important points. Our line of argumentation should keep these as the backdrop," concluded Her Excellency, an air of finality about her voice.

Everyone became silent. Undue interpolation stopped.

"What does Veerabhadra Trisanu have to say?" Tarkshya asked.

Trisanu was an intelligent man. He was not however used to speaking at such meetings. Scratching his balding head, and looking at Tarkshya he said, "I don't quite know your attitude. His Excellency, Tarkshya and I went upto the Ganga reservoir to see him off. We have seen right before our eyes the scene of his imprisonment on the other bank of the Ganga. All three of us wept our fill grieving over the fact that such a fate befell a man who came to Ayodhye, conducted a judicial enquiry, and gave lectures winning our hearts. My personal wish is that we should think up something at this juncture by which he is released here and given refuge in Ayodhye. If you think so too, I will be happy. Otherwise I will keep mum thinking it is one's fate."

The gathering suddenly turned serious. Ayodhye's apprehension had come to light. There seemed to the elders to be synergy between what Trisanu was saying and what Kshemaraja was saying. To the youth it seemed an absurd bewailing. Nobody would speak. Evasive talk was impossible at this stage. Whoever spoke had to speak something decisive and definitive.

"All right," said Her Majesty affably, realising the perplexing predicament. "Atleast things are now clear. If any new ideas occur to anybody, he may inform His Excellency. I will be in the mango garden for fifteen days. I will get a report."

Kshemaraja the chief commander walked over and sat by Her Excellency's feet. "Your Excellency! This old man's prayer to you is that you shouldn't leave Ayodhye till this is resolved." He wiped his tears on his overcloth, the *uttariya*, also called *upparani*.

"All right! I will be in the mango grove. I will not go to Amaru. All right?"

People were amazed by this interchange, and as everyone was looking, the commander put his head delightedly on the queen's foot, pressing it ever so lightly. His heart welled with emotion.

Trasadasyu who was still reeling under the impact of the momentary dent of his pride filled with pride about his mother. He had never seen in person the style of her administration.

* * * *

The queen enjoyed the pleasures of the flesh with Tarkshya till the next news came. Lust for life welled in her again.

Everyday there came with unfailing regularity the news of the Haihayas vanquishing and driving away the Kashi army.

Trasadasyu's arm throbbed everytime the news arrived.

Her Excellency sent Veerasena to bivuoac along the Sharayu river. Arms were distributed to the Bhillas of the woods. Army was mobilised in the south of Ayodhye. The experienced Dhumraksha, Kshemaraja's son, was put at the helm of the contingent. Vatsaraja was appointed to assist him. Without letting anybody else know, the queen sent for Kalia, and told him to take his thousand-strong army and billet along the Gomati river to the south of Kashi and then wait for Divodasa to leave Kashi on a military expedition with his huge army. She didn't even inform Trasadasyu about this.

An undesirable incident took place in the meantime.

Bhima Bhatta had a *yaga* done in Tamralepa.

It was usual to make a tile plaque at *yagas*.

It said: "Trasadasyu of Simhaparaputra"[1]

Even who made the board didn't have any doubts. The Brahmins who came for the *yaga* didn't come to have any doubts either. The snide criticisms of the palace hadn't reached that village.

Bhima Bhatta waited for three days before he sent the plaque with a farmer who was going to Ayodhye. He told the ryot to take it carefully ad make it over to the palace security guard.

The villagers knew about the punishment handed to Bhima Bhatta. This, they thought, was an attempt to appease the king.

Vrisha Bhatta wasn't in town. Fed up with the priesthood, he had bivouaced with Vatsaraja's new contingent as soon as he heard of the drafting being done to the army.

The security guard placed the plaque that had been wrapped in a piece of cloth in the king's chamber.

After his bath King Trasadasyu came into his room and was looking at his daily mail when his eyes fell on the plaque that had been placed on top.

A white heat of distress burnt up in Trasadasyu. His frame started to quake. He flung the plaque down on the ground in great anger. One corner of the plaque hived off before falling down at a distance. The unbroken remaining

[1] See: No 3, P.53 of my book, Mohenjodaro Seals. Even today one part of this book is in a broken state. One can see Sir John Marshall's Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilisation as the third plaque.

part glittered on the floor. The king didn't have the mind to take it up and break it further. Not upto doing any work, he reclined on his bed.

The watchman came running at the sound. Seeing the king reclining on his bed, he pushed the door closed before standing right there.

Who could have sent this plaque? Trasadasyu asked himself getting into a wordless soliloquy. What do I get by knowing it? I carry this body. That is the reason why I have become the king. Somebody from the city has challenged the authority of my kingship. What is the meaning of the position of the king? Am I not my father's son? Am I that Brahmin's son? Shall I go and ask my mother once again? I asked her once and was made to feel worthless! No, I should prove my kingship through my deeds, and thereby teach these cowards a lesson or two. I had in any case tried once to commit suicide, hadn't I? Isn't going bathing in Dharathirtha alone a better piece of behaviour than the sinful act of suicide?

He clapped, and the watchman appeared.

"Karusha! Call Tarkshya!"

"My Lord, It would take another half a *prahara* for Tarkshya to come from the mango grove."

"In that case bring me my sword, quiver and arrows."

"He will be here soon, Your Highness!"

"Where is my sword?"

The watchman went off trembling to bring the king his sword, quiver and arrows.

By the time he came back, Trasadasyu was ready to mount the horse, wearing his *kacce*, as brave warriors do, and the passionate fervour of a hero marking his bearing.

As soon as the watchman came, the king asked him to put the bow on his shoulder. He tucked the sword at his waist, and fastened the quiver on to his shoulder.

"Bring my horse." he shouted.

"Is there anything to be told to Tarkshya when he comes" the watchman stammered, frightened with the thought that the king was going to kill Tarkshya or something.

"Yes. Tell him I have gone to Kashi."

Without understanding anything, the watchman brought Vajashravas, the king's favourite horse from the stable and parked it in front of the building. Then he ran up to inform the king. "Vajashravas is standing below, Your Highness! What shall I tell Tarkshya you went to Kashi for?"

"Tell him I went there to free Ketumanta."

The clip-clop of a horse's hooves was heard in the meanwhile.

"It seems Tarkshya has arrived. I think it is better you tell him."

"Let him come. I will tell him before leaving. Your work is over. Did Tarkshya tell you that you should see that I didn't do anything till he came?"

"No, Your Highness! he didn't. I am your servant. I have done whatever work you asked me to. I took some time to bring Vajashravas. That is all. Shall I bring him?"

"Go, bring him!"

Tarkshya came hurrying up even before the sentinel went down.

"Happy news, Your Highness!" he said before signalling to the watchman to leave. Without paying any

heed to the way he was geared up and to his furious fire-emitting mien, Tarkshya took him in, winding his arm around his shoulder.

"The news has come that Divodasa is setting out the day after to confront the Haihayas with a huge army. He will camp on the near bank of the Suvarna river."

"Good. I am setting out to reach Kashi today, kill Divodasa and free Ketumanta."

It was only then that Tarkshya noticed that Trasadasyu, fitted out in a warrior-like *kacce* and the bow and arrows in hand, was on the point of leaving.

After a moment's deliberation, Tarkshya submitted: "The arrangement to free Ketumanta has been made."

"What does that mean?"

"Her Excellency has already arranged for it."

"What is that arrangement?"

"Crossing the Gomati and Sadanira rivers, our one thousand strong troop of Nagas is hiding in the forest. It will attack Kashi within three days of Divodasa leaving Kashi. It will free Ketumanta."

"Why didn't you tell me? Is my mother's hint that I am not the king?"

"This is group battle. Even the king shouldn't know about it. This is the plan that the commander makes."

"Does Kshemaraja know about this?"

"Even he doesn't know. I devised it."

"But you are saying the queen organised it."

"I got this conveyed to Kalia through the queen. Kalia knows that border area like the palm of bis hand."

"All right. I will go as a foot soldier under Kalia's leadership."

"Sit down, Trasadasyu! Let's talk."

"You are deceiving me and are plotting so I don't go to war. I have become Ayodhye's laughing stock." said Trasadasyu pointing to the broken piece of the plaque lying on the floor.

Tarkshya leaned over, took up the plaque and looked intently at it. He mulled it for a while. He examined the plaque, its front, the back and its edges.

"What are you doing? Are you gauging its weight?"

"It hasn't been six days since this plaque was made. This has been made by Brahmins. It has been fashioned in some remote village. Vrisha Bhatta couldn't have done it. Joining Vatsaraja as a soldier, he has gone away to the southern border. Bhima Bhatta himself has done it and has sent along with some villagers. Charkshaka!" he called the watchman.

"My Lord!" said the watchman eagerly as he came running.

"How did this come here?"

"A farmer from Tamralepa brought it yesterday and gave it to the gate-keeper. He handed it over to me. I placed it here last evening for His Excellency to see."

"All right. You may go." said Tarkshya, looking at Trasadasyu. "Will you behead Bhima Bhatta, or shall I?"

Trasadasyu thought it over for a while before saying: "Can I become Purukutsa's son if I kill Bhima Bhatta? What is the evidence for saying this has been done by Bhima Bhatta, and not by anybody else?"

"Since there is no hook in it for hanging it on an animal, it is done by Brahmins. If you look at the text, it hasn't been done in Ayodhye. The text writer had written

'paura'. But the master has tried to erase it with a needle when it was still fresh. Had it been a board done in Ayodhye, it wouldn't have broken so easily. It would have bent. This is pipe clay. They have made it with mud taken from a collapsed house. Ayodhye citizens smear the self-same mud onto their houses over and over again. The one who fashioned this plaque hasn't been able even to get tempered and good mud. He has taken the old mud from a house reduced to rubble, has sieved it, has carved it with his hand, and burnt it on the oven. He has pressed it at places with a wooden plank so it would assume a squarish shape. But even skilled professionals would not do it. If you feel inhibited because you would be killing a Brahmin, leave it to me. I don't have that inhibition. People like Bhima Bhatta do not deserve to be called Brahmins. They could not even be called human beings. They are not fit to live."

"You were concerned about their womenfolk, weren't you?"

"These are war times. None who is a traitor to the king should survive."

"The idea of killing him doesn't seem all right to me. How long will that devil live in any case?"

"Is this your final decision?"

"Yes, it is!"

"I will in that case think up a plan so that he loses all interest in the very act of living. Where have you got ready to go now, Trasadasyu?"

"I will go and free Ketumanta. Even if I have to lay down my life in the bargain, it is fine by me."

Tarkshya then understood the gist, the essential meaning of Trasadasyu's words.

"If you agree, we will go after a few days. If you are keen to go right now, I will accompany you. Even if I become a victim of the thousand Naga soldiers camping on the shores of Sadaniira, it is all right. It is your will and wish. Your going to Kashi openly amounts to exposing our secret troops to the butchers."

"You always bring up some such hurdle and prevent me from going to war!"

Tarkshya didn't speak, appreciating as he did the half-acquiescence. Silence spread all round.

"Divodasa seems to be intelligent." Tarkshya spoke up, breaking the silence.

"Why do you say that?"

"It seems he placed five hundred cavalry men in each of the three transit passages of the Kashi fort before he went away, fearing a military raid. Rumanvanta, the former king didn't have such good sense. It was possible to conquer Kashi with two hundred of my soldiers and Kalia's three hundred soldiers. The battle is not that easy now. The mistake that his father made seems to have taught Divodasa a lesson."

"Are you frightening me?"

"You are my disciple. I know it for sure that you fear nothing. However we should learn one quality from one person. I said I appreciate Divodasa's intelligence. Only when we understand the enemy's cleverness can we search for a counter."

"What clever reply have you thought up for this?"

"Kalia's Naga army will reach Kashi in four days. They are four thousand people. Seeing the numbers, it is possible that Kashi's western army contingent will go to

help it. We have our border in the north. The chances of Divodasa telling his soldiers to stay put there and not to budge from there under any circumstances are high. It would be in the fitness of things that our troops enter from the western border. I am thinking of how to get to the western border from here."

"What does Her Excellency say?"

"All this is our work. She doesn't tell us to do things in any particular way. She determines the goals. We try to realize them to the best of our abilities."

"Won't you inform this to Kshemaraja?"

"Kshemaraja doesn't worry about such group battles. His is war of the military expedition type. There is none who is as experienced as he is in such warfare. He fought with the Haihayas themselves. Her Excellency has seen to it that such open animosities don't happen. She has nipped such animosities in the bud. That is why Ayodhye has got such respect and prestige."

"Why are you telling me all these things?"

"I am telling you all this to indicate to you that you wreck such good work done by Her Excellency. One should threaten somebody with war, but should not actually declare war. I have participated in three wars in the last ten years without declaring open wars. It is difficult to live if you display open animosity. The foundation of the state becomes loose. Is there a limit to such polarities as king-subject, Brahmin-Kshatriya, Rigvedi-Atharvavedi, that lanesman-this lanesman? Our purposes must be clean. They should be such that people should like and appreciate them. Our attitudes should be such that our consciences should be clean. Our inner soul shouldn't get turbid even when there is opposition. You learnt the skills of arms and

warfare from me well. But I didn't have any chance to teach you the lesson of purity of conscience. It is not something that one learns after being taught. It is something that needs to be told as and when the occasion arises. I broached the topic of killing Bhima Bhatta to test you. You replied to it like a king. I felt satisfied. You should have the same forgiving mindset even when you are on the point of killing enemies in war. One who wages a war out of fury is a sinner. He will be rewarded with victory neither in this world nor in that world. Only such man is the real king. Only then will you be the King Mandhata's real grandson.'

"Isn't King Purukutsa my father?"

"King Purukutsa never waged a war. The credit of all wars fought and won by Queen Purukutsani goes to King Purukutsa. His name has become immortal. Sages, seers and saints have composed and sung Vedic stanzas on him."

"Am I Simha Bhatta's son? Tell me straight, don't hedge!"

"I will tell you clearly, listen! You are a demigod. Your mother performed the maitra-varuna sacrifice and gave birth to you. You are not born to any human being. You are born of a god's boon."

Trasadasyu went to sleep that night while staring at the paired stars of Maitra and Varuna in the clear night sky.

In his dream he felt as if the paired stars came and stroked his head.

He got up suddenly and sat gaping at the stars over again.

He felt as if an unknown vague stream flowed from the Mithuna star and became one with his body, as if the Yamala stars waved their hands and proclaimed, "You are a demi-god!"

An electric impulse circulated round Trasadasyu's body before the following Vedic stanza fell out of his mouth with all their natural canorous rhythm:

mama dvitaa rashtram kshatriyasya vishwaryoorvishcha
amrita yadhaa naha

kratum sachante varunasya devaa raajaami
krishteerupamasya vavrehee

aham raajaa varunoo mahyam taanysuryaani prathmaa
dhaarayanta

kratum sachante varunasya deevaa raajaami
krishterupamasya vavrehee

ahamindroo varunaste mahitvoorvii gabhiire rajasi
sumeekee

tvashteeva vishvaa bhuvanaani vidvaan tamairayam
rodasii dhhrayam cha

ahamapoo apinvamukshamaanaa dhaarayam divam
sadana ritasya

ritena putroo aditerya taavoota tridhaama prathaya
dvibhuuma

maam naraha svashvaa vaajayantoo maam vritaaha na
maranee hamaeehe

trinoomyaajim maghavaahamindra iyarmi reenumabhi
bhuutyoojaaha

aham taa vishvaachakaram nakirmaa daivyam sahoo
varate apratiitam

yanmaa soomasoo mamadanyadukthoonhee bhayeetee
rajasii apaaree

vidushtee vishvaa bhuvanaani tasya taa braviiti
varunaaya veedaha

tvam vritraani shrinmiishee jaghanvaantvam vrita arinaa indra sindhuun

asmakamatra pitarasta aasanspta rishuyoo daurgahee badhyamaanee

ta aayajantaa trasadasyumasyaa indram na vritaturarmadadeevam

purukutsanii hi vaamadaa shadhavaibharindraa varunaa namoobhi

atha raajaanam trasadasyumasya vritahanam dadathurardhadeevam

raayaa vayam sasavaamso madeema havyeena deevaa yamaseena gaavaha

*taam dheenumindraavarunaa uvam noo vishvaaha dhattamanaprasphurantim**

raayaa vayam sasa vaam madeema havyeena deevaa yavaseena gaavaha

taam dheenumindraavarunaa yuvam noo vishvaahaa dhatta manupsphurantiim

(Addressed to Indra and Varuna)

1. I am the king. Mine is the empire. Me as indeed others who determine the flow of life are all immortal. The gods obey and follow Varuna's will. I am the king of men's loftiest cover.
2. I am King Varuna. To me were given these first existing high celestial powers.. The gods obey Varuna's will. I am the king of men's loftiest cover.
3. I am Indra and Varuna. In their greatness these two roam the wide deep and fairly fashioned regions. Even as Tvastar knows it, they have held together the two halves of the world.

4. I caused the moisture-shedding waters to flow, and set the heaven firm in the seat of order. By law the son of Aditi, the watchdog of law, has spread abroad in three-fold measure.

5. Heroes with noble horses, ready for battle, and selected warriors call on me in combat.

6. I did all this. Gods' own conquering power never impeded me whom none opposed. When praise and *soma* juice made me joyful, both the unbounded regions are frightened.

7. Everyone knows these deeds of yours. You tell this to Varuna, You, the Great Disposer! You are known for having slain the Vrtras. You caused the floods that were obstructed to flow.

8. Our fathers then were these, the Seven Sages when the son of Durgaha was captive. For her they gained by sacrifice Trasadasyu, a demi-god, like Indra, conquering foes.

9. Purukutsani, Purukutsa's wife, paid you O Indra-varuna by giving oblation. Then unto her you gave King Trasadasyu, the demi-god, and the slayer of foes.

10. May we, possessing much, delight in riches, gods in oblations, and the grass in the pasture. And that milch-cow, who shrinks not from milking, O Indra-Varuna, give us daily.

11. May we, possessing much, delight in riches, gods in oblations, and the grass in the pasture. And that milch-cow, who shrinks not from milking, O Indra-Varuna, give us daily.

TRASADASYU-8

Tarkshya went over the same day to the mango grove and told Her Excellency the queen that Trasadasyu was thinking of participating in the battle of Kashi.

Her Excellency got in a fret of anxiety.

"If the king himself goes to war, its natural leadership falls on him. Trasadasyu is impetuous and rash by nature. Can such a man control things in a way that does no damage to the soldiers? I have heard that he didn't heed the commander's advice in the Kanyakubja forest."

"Even I have the same worry. I will be there with him. But of late it appears doubts about me have stirred in His Excellency's mind."

"What kind of doubts?"

"He feels that I have made him an effeminate subordinate subcook in the kitchen. He was ready to go to Kashi all by himself. He changed his mind after I told him Kalia's soldiers were there waiting."

"What were you doing alone?"

"It is true that I nabbed Shambarasura single-handedly. But there is a sea of difference between that ambience and the Kashi ambience. If Her Excellency agrees, shall I ask Veerabhadra Trisanu?"

"Does he have any experience of group fights?"

"Some time in the past he fought big wars. I will tell him about group battles."

"All right. See that he doesn't do anything indiscreet. Besides, we are keeping the Bhilla king here without any reason. Promise them that we will free the Bhilla king and his associates. In case they agree, take them too."

* Rgveda 4.42.1-10

2

On the fifth day of *Kartika vadya* month, Divodasa finished his worship of God Vishwanatha, and taking five thousand soldiers and a thousand cavalry men, went on a military expedition toward the Suvarna river, crossing the Ganga en route.

He was a bit depressed. Had there not been the Haihaya attack, his dream of entering Magadha from three directions would have fulfilled. Now it had come to pass that he had to face the Haihayas. Are the Haihayas trying to bring down Magadha? Or is their attention trained on Kashi?, Divodasa found himself wondering. He had no clear idea. But one thing he didn't know for sure. That was the Haihayas' war policy. They wouldn't give up half way if they proceeded with a particular goal in their minds. If they were going to Magadha, nobody could stop them. Even if they are vanquished, they would come over and over again. If their aim is Kashi, then I am doomed, thought Divodasa. I may defeat them once or maybe twice. They were the kind who would come again and again. He cursed himself for crowning himself the king after incarcerating Ketumanta when he returned from Ayodhye. He knew that Ketumanta became popular and acquired a name as an icon of righteousness in Ayodhye. To seek Ayodhye's pardon is an impossible task. Trasadasyu couldn't lend me his helping hand at the risk of wounding the Ayodhyeyins' feelings. He had relocated Ketumanta from the palace to Bhadrakoti, lest the old guard of ministers plotted to unshackle Ketumanta. He had mustered five hundred horsemen on the northern, western and

eastern borders to insure against the possibility of an attack from either Ayodhye or Champa. He felt a twinge of regret for not having earned friendships. But he had to face squarely situations that came up.

It was easier to cross the Ganga than to get to the shores of the Suvarna river. The hillocks there were not fully wooded. They were small hillocks covered with sparse vegetation. Even drinking water was hard to come by till you reached the river. The moment it was known that they were to attack Magadha, small contingents of soldiers would come running from the west and tell their tales.

If one heard their stories, the courage of even the main army would evaporate. Divodasa did an intelligent thing. He didn't try to cross the Suvarna river. Had he done that, transporting horses, food and other material would have been difficult. He wanted to see in which direction the Haihaya king would turn his army before setting off his invasion. Bivouacking on the northern bank itself, he rested, waiting for Bhadrasena's army. He sent off his intelligence men to search for possible hints of the Haihaya army.

They waited for fifteen days, but there was no trace of the Haihaya army. Divodasa got anxious. He called his commanders and ministers, and laid out what he had in mind. "We waited all these days," he said. "We have come thus far and have offered prayers to God Vishwanatha of Kashi. There are no signs yet of the Haihaya army. Another ten *haradaris*, and we will be on the Magadha border. How about occupying Pataliputra?"

'Yes, it is better to occupy Magadha than to potter away here' so went the consensual opinion. 'Even if we don't get anything else there, we will atleast get water, food and women. The Magadhi girls are well known all over the Aaryavarta empire for their graceful charm. Besides they

are easily available. Let's turn that side,' Divodasa turned in, thinking that they would wait for another couple of days before moving in the direction of Magadha.

It was midnight. It felt as though somebody shouted, "Go to Kashi! go to Kashi!" in Divodasa's dream. Divodasa got up suddenly and looked around. A star came unstuck and fell down. Getting as he did into a fret of worry that this was inauspicious, Divodasa couldn't sleep. Sleep did come in the small hours of the morning, but ugly, unpleasant nightmares flooded it. He didn't wake up even after two *praharas* after sunrise. Shaking him the royal guard then roused him from sleep."There is a courier from Kashi" he submitted.

Divodasa hurried to his feet in a fluster. He walked out of his camp without even doing any washing. He saw the messenger from Kashi and took him inside. His clothes were torn. Blood had oozed from his limbs and there were dried bloodstains on the clothes.

"What are the tidings?" Divodasa asked.

"The news is not very good, Your Excellency! Please pardon me!"

"Tell me, don't quail!"

"Two days after you left Kashi on the military expedition, a group of a thousand Naga men from the woods appeared in our midst in Kashi. We are at a loss how they came in so close without our knowledge. "Where is King Ketumanta?" they asked the palace security guard, their tone of voice hostile and posture intimidatory. "His Excellency is not here, he is in the fort" the security guard replied. They raided the fort and freeing the king, whisked him away. "

"Are they Nagas, or people from Ayodhye?" asked Divodasa after mulling things over for a while.

"Going by their dress and speech, they seem to be Nagas"

"There is a Naga settlement to the north of Ayodhye."

"I don't know, Your Majesty! There may be. As soon as the event took place, the premier sent three of us off to convey it to you. The three of us travelled in fact together in the inscrutably thick jungle. We found ourselves face to face with the Haihaya army when we were at a distance of about thirty krosus from here. The Haihaya army arrested two of us. My horse got injured. And it subsequently died. I was injured too. But evading their eyes I somehow escaped, and shambling and hobbling under the cover of the vegetation, I reached the shores of the Suvarna river. The premier had said that you were camping somewhere on the bank of the Suvarna. Accordingly I came looking for you along the bank. It is my good fortune that I saw Your Excellency. Had I lost my way, I don't know how many days it would have taken to reach you."

"Let that be. Where was the Haihaya army headed to?"

"It was heading to Kashi. There is a thick jungle about thirty *krosus* from here. The Haihaya army is in that forest now, marching toward Kashi."

"On the near or the far bank?"

"On the near bank."

"How did you get to know they belong to the Haihaya army."

"Some among those that surrounded us were speaking the Andhra language."

"Are you sure that they are not Ayodhyeyians."

"They are not from Ayodhye, Your worshipful Majesty! Some of them spoke our language, but only in substandard pronunciation. It wasn't our kind of pronunciation."

"One thing is clear anyway. The Haihaya army went off the regular route, took the jungle path, and dodging us has already crossed the Suvarna river. It is heading toward Kashi. Right?"

"That is right, Your Excellency!"

"You have taken pains, traveled quite a bit to give me this news. Go take you meal. Don't let this on to anyone. Get your injuries treated by the physician."

"All right, Your Majesty!"

The messenger went away, disappointed. He had desired that he would be awarded some prize for having taken so much trouble to bring the tidings. However he went over to his meal, taking a mite of comfort in the fact that he wasn't punished for having brought such a bad news.

"We have now to go to Kashi." Divodasa called and told his commanders. "The news has come that the Haihaya army is proceeding toward Kashi. It has already crossed the Suvarna river. They have traversed through the irregular route in the woods. That is the reason we haven't met them. They might have got tired because of the journey through the forest terrain. They have made the mistake that I didn't. Our army has taken rest for fifteen days. The Haihayas are now caught in the strait between the Ganga and the Suvarna rivers. You brave warriors! Move! Let's chop them up. If we find ourselves following them on our way to Kashi, we will kill them from behind. If we find ourselves face to face with them, we will fight them. Not even a single Haihaya should return!" Pepping up his people thus, Divodasa had them pull stakes after the meal that day before leading them on to Kashi.

TRASADASYU-9

King Trasadasyu sat treating the wounded Trisanu in an underground floor of the fort in Kashi.

The news that had reached Divodasa was a half-truth.

Divodasa had gotten hold of an Ayodhye secret without quite knowing it. Only, he wasn't aware of it. He only dreamt of defeating and driving the Haihayas away.

Tarkshya along with Trasadasyu, Trisanu and fifty horsemen crossed the Ganga and joined Kalia's troops at the predetermined place near the huge Banyan tree that was at a distance of twelve krosus from Kashi.

Divodasa's five hundred horsemen had by then pitched camps on the eastern and western borders at a distance of a krosu. Kalia's Naga soldiers had fifteen days ago traveled in small groups through the forest and bivouacked at an appointed forest about twelve krosus from Kashi. They were now waiting for Divodasa's arrival. Kalia felt proud that Trasadasyu himself had come over.

On the day that Divodasa had left Kashi, Kalia's men had, travelling in groups, fanned out in different parts of the forest, which was at a distance of a *haradari* from Kashi. Kalia reached the palace early in the morning. He woke up the security guard and asked him, "Where is King Ketumanta?" "He is not here," replied the guard, rubbing the sleep from the eyes. "He is in the prison in the underground cellar in the fort." He went back to sleep. Kalia proceeded quietly toward the fort. Tarkshya, Trasadasyu and Trisanu were also with him. Light had already broken over the world.

As the security personnel standing guard outside the prison saw so many people, they ran in and slammed the door shut.

"It's me, fellow! They will kill me." he shouted. He wrapped a *peta* around his face.

The ones inside opened the door ever slowly and ever so gingerly. Tarkshya flounced in.

"Kalia! Stay quiet. The door will open at the appropriate time." he assured Kalia. His soldiers went and stood in front of the door.

There was the sound, after ten minutes, of the door being bolted. But Tarkshya didn't come out. The Kashi security guards had caught him.

Kalia kicked the door open before unsheathing his sword and lifting his hand, poised for action. He hacked the two guards who had arrested Tarkshya before entering. His army tailed him in.

He caught hold of another guard, and bashed him up whereupon the sentinel said, "The keys of the prison door are on the nail in that room."

Turning him into a shield he walked straight into the prisonhouse in the underground cellar. King Ketumanta recognized him before he came out along with him.

"Now we will try to reach our forest at the soonest." said Tarkshya.

Hacking the guard who accosted him on his way, he came out of the fort leading Ketumanta by hand. The rest of the Naga soldiers came out too.

"Where is King Trasadasyu and Trisanu?" hollered Kalia.

Tarkshya hurried toward the fort door.

The main gate closed in the meanwhile. There was the sound inside of the iron crossbar being fastened.

Trasadasyu and Trisanu remained inside. Six soldiers too remained inside with them.

What happened was:

Trasadasyu and Trisanu who were accompanying Tarkshya didn't see Tarkshya get down into the cellar. Because they didn't see Tarkshya, they thought the guards who were on the upper floors might have nabbed him. So they ran toward the guards. Six soldiers also ran along.

It was when their fight was on that Kalia's soldiers came out with King Ketumanta.

The clanking sound of the clash of swords was still being heard. There was also Trisanu's solemn voice turning to a moan.

Tarkshya and Kalia kept enough men for King Ketumanta's protection. They went around the fort once to see if there was any suitable place from which they could enter the fort.

Divodasa had left Kashi only after seeing that no such point would be available.

Back then they didn't know the use of the common iguana as a military tool. Gargantuan common iguanas used to be trained to hold on to a rope that would be tied to them before being flung into the forts that were to be raided. Soldiers would thus enter the fort along this rope.There was no conceivable way in sight now as to how to enter the fort from outside.

Tarkshya and Kalia came away wringing their hands in helplessness.

Tarkshya sat the king under the tree, then said, "King Trasadasyu and Justice Trisanu are trapped inside the fort. You should do a kind favour, Your Highness! You have

become the king of Kashi again. Please permit me to tomtom this. No matter what, this fort shouldn't get into his possession."

"Yes. The responsibility of saving King Trasadasyu is mine. Tomtom it."

Kalia's men proclaimed the following: King Ketumanta has been released from prison. He, and not Divodasa, is the king from today."

King Ketumanta had earned special popularity in Kashi. As soon as people heard the news, thousands of citizens collected in front of the fort and began to shower flowers on the king. Tarkshya had a high seat placed right in front of the fort, got the Brahmins to do the coronation on a small scale before shouting to the soldiers inside the fort, "Open the door! This is the royal order."

The door didn't open.

"Kalia! Half a day has already gone by." Tarkshya submitted to Kalia, a desperately earnest streak in his voice. "The thousand horsemen whom Divodasa has detailed for the protection of the border may confront us. Let your army be here. There seemed to be no soldiers in the city. The Ganga flows on one side of the fort. There are steep rocks here. A couple of hundred soldiers would do here. There is a forest on the other side of the fort. Divodasa's horsemen can fight with their swords and not with bows and arrows. Our Naga soldiers should sit on treetops of this forest with their bows and arrows. Not even one arrow should go waste. When Divodasa's escort horsemen come, you should unleash arrows atleast on half of these horsemen. If you promise you would do this much, I will go to Ayodhye and come back with an army. The occasion has arisen now of losing my face and honour. You

should save my honour. I will not be able to show my face to Her Excellency."

"We may lose our lives, I don't care. We won't cross the line laid down by you." Kalia assured Tarkshya.

"His Majesty should come to the palace" the citizens were already insisting. They were distributing sweets. The musical instrument was blowing.

Tarkshya took Kalia and put him at His Excellency's feet. "You should have known him. He is Kalia, the one who freed the city of Gaya from the Nepal king and put it at your feet. He is a man of steel and substance. The soldiers detailed for the protection of borders might now invade us. Kalia will keep vigil at strategic places and see that they don't do that. I will go over to Ayodhye and bring whatever army I could for your security. Please give me orders!"

"Go by all means. I will band together the youth I know in the city who have allegiance to me. I will also place my old premiers and commanders at your disposal. You are my liberator!" said the king.

"As soon as they come, you tell the horsemen the following: 'King Ketumanta has ordered you to lay down arms and come forward.' In case there are soldiers among them who owe allegiance to King Ketumanta might lay down arms once they hear his name. They might fight for us. Keep the news of the king being caught inside the fort confidential. Ask them to eat from their bundle of food."

"You also come!"

King Ketumanta went in a procession to the palace.

Kalia split his soldiers so that a thousand soldiers stationed on the banks of the Ganga and nine hundred soldiers sat on trees in the forest. He asked them to take

their meal from the bundle of food and to drink water. Tarkshya saw them take out the rottis from their bundles and eat.

He traversed toward Ayodhye alone, weary from hunger.

* * * *

Divodasa's premier sent for the border security force. They came over to Kashi from both directions.

When they approached the fort, they heard the following shout: "His Excellency King Ketumanta is the present king of Kashi. If you have to come in, put away the arms and come. That is the king's order!" About two hundred soldiers stuck their swords into the ground and entered by the side of bank of the Ganga. About eight hundred of them, those that had their loyalties with Divodasa came forward to fight for him. Three hundred people died because of the arrows unleashed at them. The rest pitched camps at a distance where arrows wouldn't reach them.

The city of Kashi thus split down the middle. The fort itself became the boundary line. The body of the fort belonged now to King Ketumanta and the huge frontyard went to Divodasa. The security guards owing allegiance to Divodasa, who once opened the main door tricked into it by Tarkshya's feints didn't open it now. They didn't even when the mayor went.

Tarkshya went over first of all to Bhadrasenya's first camp and saw him. Bhadrasenya who had heard of Tarkshya's reputation has him ushered in. 'Queen Purukutsani has already expressed her policy in response to the message you sent her." said Tarkshya, praising him for the victory he had achieved without letting on his secret.

"The situation has changed of late. Did you run into Divodasa's army on the way?"

"No, we didn't! All we know is that he has gone on a military expedition with five thousand troops. Has he mounted an attack on Magadha?"

"No, he hasn't. He knows that you have proceeded toward Kashi. I have come here to warn you in advance. Kashi citizens harbour no loyalty to Divodasa. When the king came here on a military expedition, they have rebelled to install their former king Ketumanta back on the throne. The outer parts of the fort are still in Divodasa'a possession. In case you agree to Ketumanta's reign, you may please occupy the southern part of Kashi that was until recently in Divodasa's possession. King Ketumanta is a friend and ally of Ayodhye. He was the personage who came to Ayodhye as an arbitrator of our dispute. He is a righteous pious man. Her Excellency has sent word that you can go ahead in your adventures without harming King Ketumanta. Divodasa's army is likely to follow you. Her Majesty has asked you to proceed carefully."

"Didn't Divodasa go toward Magadha?"

"He waited on the banks of the Suvarna river just to find out where your attention is set. You crossed the Suvarna even before forty krosus. You travelled in the stretch between these two rivers.

It is not good for him to follow you. Having learnt about Ketumanta's release in Kashi, he might travel straight to Kashi. It seems to me to be appropriate to mount an attack following him once we get to know of his crossing the river and proceeding to Kashi. His Excellency is a competent person."

"Is Ketumanta really your friend?"

"Her Excellency thinks so."

Bhadrasenya had to scratch his head for a while in order to cotton on to the meaning of what Tarkshya said. But cotton on he did in the end.

"Convey this message to the queen. We wish to take only the southern part of Kashi."

"Ayodhye will be ever grateful to Your Excellency."

* * * *

Tarkshya entered the forests to the south of Ayodhye and saw Dhumraksha and Vatsaraja. He told them that they had freed Ketumanta and that Kalia was guarding the Kashi fort with his thousand troops, standing in Divodasa's way. They were glad to hear it. "Kalia needs some help" Tarkshya continued. "You tactfully enter Kashi from the north. You tell King Ketumanta that you have come precisely for Kalia's help. On your way you will fine the two armies ready and poised for a war. You shouldn't go this side. You take your army so as to touch the northern part of Kashi. You should do it discreetly so that you run into no other army on the way, and you should travel only through the Ayodhye woods.'

Tarkshya traversed from there and reaching the western border of Ayodhye, gave the same orders to Veerasena. "You should" he told Veerasena, "travel only along the Ayodhyeyian border and reach the north part of Kashi. Then you should get King Ketumanta's permission before going to Kalia's help. You shouldn't be seen by any other army. This is possible only if you traverse within the Ayodhye borders."

He then went on to Renu village on the Kanyakubja border, saw the elders there before sending for Shambarasura. He could well have entered the border

himself. But he didn't have information about the latest situation in Kanyakubja. Shambarasura came running the moment he heard Tarkshya's name. Tarkshya told him the positive happy news that his granddaughter Kleo was happy in Ayodhye and that she had indeed become an Ayodhyeyian. He took him aside and in privacy let him know the news of Trasadasyu being imprisoned. He didn't hold back anything. He beseeched Shambarasura to go himself and inspect the Kashi fort and to accompany him and do it since there was no one in Ayodhye who matched his intelligence, experience and the skill set required for building forts."

"I don't know much about stone forts. All of the forts that I built are wooden ones. Nikambasura, my uncle's son knows how to build stone forts. Besides, we have our old *bhushundi* explosive. It will take time to cart it from here."

"Could we take it in a chariot pulled by four horses?"

"We haven't taken it anywhere. We can do as you say."

"In that case you can come with us, can't you?"

"Do I have time?"

"Her Excellency doesn't yet know the news. I will send a good chariot from Ayodhye. Will you come to Ayodhye piling the chariot with the *bhushundi*?"

* * * *

Tarkshya moved from there over to Her Excellency to tell the news.

Tarkshya felt as if his eyes clouded over with darkness.

It was perhaps due to physical fatigue, or the lack of courage to see Her Majesty. He wrapped his arms around the horse's neck and rested. Another apprehension began to beset him:

'Why am I so subservient to Ayodhye? What is the relationship between Ayodhye and me? I was a boy on the Khasi hills. I showed King Mandhata the way in the woods and took him to Pragjothisha city. This was appreciated and then I was taken to Ayodhye. Since then I haven't seen my parents. I grew up as a palace slave. I worked under King Purukutsa as a child doorkeeper. Mandhata's queen raised me with great affection. She looked after me with greater solicitude than she did other child workers. When Purukutsani chased her brother I got bashed because I stood in her way. Moreover she told her father and had me kept away from the palace. I grew into manhood, doing trivia like mucking out the stable, washing the horses and squelching gadflies on the horses. I learnt charioteering. I was fourteen years old when I drove the chariot for the first time for the king when the king's charioteer fell ill and thus became King Mandhata's favourite charioteer. In the battle in Kanyakubja I got my shoulder in the way of the arrow that was speeding toward King Mandhata, and injured, I fell off from the chariot. In his keenness to attack the fort, King Mandhata thought I had passed away before he proceeded further like a real hero with reins in one hand and the sword in the other. The asuras took me away to their home in the forest. Sixteen years old then I stayed with them for four years and learnt their secret skills from Shambarasura's grandfather. Shambarusara's elder sister had a crush on me and she treated me. She used to take me away to the woods, averting the elders' eyes. Her younger sisters had got married and since no one had married her, she used to say, she had the right to marry the boy of her choice. In order to sexually satisfy her I drank horsemilk,which made me virile. But along with it mating with women became

distasteful to me. When she told her grandfather that she would marry me, the whole village opposed it before I was excommunicated. I returned to Ayodhye. Mandhata was surprised but he gave me refuge over again. When Purukutsa became the king I came to be his pimp. Should a universally acknowledged valiant hero like Mandhata have such an effeminate son? I saw Mandhata's qualities in his daughter. Queen Purukutsani held the reins of the state with just one valiant act of a day. Purukutsani is a courageous piece of work, a gumptious and spunky woman who knows what to do when. She would assign me work appropriate to me, watch the results of such work and thwart all my efforts to retire. Except for one piece of offensive behaviour in the childhood, which put me off, she has always been an object of adoration for me. She got loyal service from me. In the end she got me even onto her bed. Why did I assassinate Purukutsa? I did it for her welfare. Had Purukutsa lived on, he would have brought her problems that she would have been hard put to resolve. He didn't know what kind of a problem he himself was. Although she doesn't know that I am her husband's killer, I am racked with remorse when I find myself on her bed. Some scruple plagues me. Trasadasyu is now a prisoner. I can live on if he can survive. In case he has already died, I can't face the queen. After confirming it, I will also die, eating the poison that the demons have taught me about. I will die, not for Ayodhye, but for Purukutsani's sake.' The pictures spanning his whole life flashed across his unconscious memory screen with unsettling force. He had never seen such monstrous images from his past life.

Nobody knew Trasadasyu in Kashi. Things would be difficult if because of Trisanu's or the six soldiers'

carelessness, the prison guards came to know that this prisoner is the king of Ayodhye. It would be an unspeakable tragedy if Trasadasyu has become a casualty in the battle inside the fort. There was no way to make this clear in Kashi. Tarkshya got in a fret of consternation by the realisation of how a moment's carelessness could nullify and negate a lifetime's service.

What is in a human's hands? Yet it was not possible not to inform the queen. The rest is in god's hands.

Pressing his forehead to the horse's back, Tarkshya prayed to Lord Indra.

Her Excellency listened to the news coolly and calmly.

"I too had apprehensions. I vowed to go to God Pashupathinatha, but didn't go."

She went in, and sitting cross-legged in front of the idol, waved a little oil- lamp downwards in front of the idol, put a coin in dedication to Him. "Oh Pashupathinatha! Save my son. I will on the first day of the Karthika month light a thousand lights for Pashupathinatha and feed a thousand brahmins. Please vouchsafe me this!"

Rational thought works as long as the situation is subject to the control of the (im)possibilities of rationality.

Where there is a problem because the situation is outside the control of rational thought, there.

The intelligent man loses his bearings.

The faithful man appeals to god as his ultimate resort.

Only God save the man who doesn't believe in God! He would grieve and suffer inside before going limp and insensate.

* * * *

The following morning Shambarasura and

Nikambasura arrived with the covered *bhushundi* and the required explosive chemical material on the chariot and with two hundred *rakshasas* in tow.

Tarkshya had them meet Her Excellency.

Shambarusara breathed in a low soft voice: "Trasadasyu has saved my life. Getting him released is my responsibility. May Goddess Arthemi give me good sense! May God Nakulisha give me strength! Let the goddess's vow be on me!"

The goddess blessed them.

* * * *

The *bhushundi* was quite heavy. Yet the horses lugged it, even if with great effort. The *bhushundi* was ferried across the Ganga in as many as six boats. Tarkshya took Shambarusara and Nikambasura ahead of others and let them examine the fort. Since there was the Ganga on one side, Veerasena was sent off to find out from the Ayodhye premier if there were any secret tunnels leading out of the fort. The premier was puzzled. "The fort is still in our possession. Why this hurry to get it opened?" he countered. Although Veerasena was not smart in terms of using words, he was smart in terms of intelligence. "There is a battle raging right now between five thousand Divodasa's soldiers and four thousand Haihaya men, about four *haradaris* from here." he submitted. " Whoever wins the battle will try to conquer this fort. The conquest of the fort would take the sap out of the Kashi state. The sooner the fort comes into our possession, the better."

"No, in fact the fort was built for prisoners" the premier told the old commander. "Provision has been made inside for accomodating a hundred prisoners. Part of it is for housing the security guards. Grandfather Sudasa didn't

make any tunnels for its special security."

Nikambasura, who was by, asked, "Which side is the prisoners' rooms and which side is the watchmen's restrooms?"

"The half that lies on the side of the Ganga is for the watchmen, and the half that lies on the side of the forest is the prison." The premier drew a figure on the floor with his thumb. Nikambasura took him away to introduce him to Shambarasura.

"Please draw it on a piece of cloth" requested Shambarasura.

Having seen the figure the premier drew on the cloth, Shambarusara stood the *bhushundi* at such a special angle that the stones that might fling off with the explosion wouldn't fly on to the prison. He piled several pieces of wood one upon the other and saw that the *bhushundi* stood well at the angle against these wood pieces. It was an old *bhushundi*. Nikambasura used tubes to fill the *bhushundi* with the mixture of sulphur and jaggery. The *rakshasas* had forgotten to bring along an important thing, and that was the undressed *jadi* cotton that they had grown in their forest. They tried a few times to use the cotton available there and light it through the hole meant for kindling the explosive. But the fire would go out when it travelled down just half the thread. Shambarasura was upset.

He said he would himself insert a firebrand into the hole to light the *bhushundi*. This was fraught with peril. If it was even a second late, the *bhushundi* would detonate, taking the life of the one who inserted the firebrand. On the other hand if they decided to get the *jadi* cotton, precious time would be lost. There was no rule about at what moment an army would win a war and rush into the fort.

Nikambasura offered to do it himself. But Shambarusara would have none of it.

In the end Shambarasura pushed everybody away before he joined his hands at his chest in salutation to the *bhushundi*, and praying wordlessly to Goddess Arthemi, took up the firebrand.

He gingerly inserted the live faggot into the *bhushundi* hole before running away. He did it twice.

The *bhushundi* didn't kindle. Seeing Shambarasura's desperate and flurried run, some unknowledgeable Naga soldiers standing at a distance gave a loud gauffaw. This provoked Shambarasura.

He slowly inserted the live cinder once again into the hole. This time it caught fire, seeing which Shambarusara did a bolt.

Red sparks flew out of the hole.

There was a sudden explosion.

An iron door along with the stone wall adjacent to it flew off.

The door, which had come unstuck, hit Shambarasura.

Struggling and writhing in pain, he fell down to the ground. On his body fell ten or twelve huge stones that were part of the wall. Some more were on the point of falling off.

Both Shambarusara and the *bhushundi* disappeared in the pile of the stony rubble.

Nikambasura stopped Tarkshya who was about to rush that side before suggesting, "Shambarasura's end has arrived. Go release Trasadasyu. I will take care of Shambarasura."

Both Tarkshya and Kalia rushed inside.

Frightened by the thunderous sound of the *bhushundi*, the watchmen had cringed and hidden in their room. Tarkshya got into the Key Room, and took the key chains from the pegs on the wall. His inference that Trasadasyu would be in the room in which Ketumanta had been kept turned out to be true. He opened the prison door and released Trasadasyu.

Six soldiers helped him to free Trisanu. Trisanu was injured.

"There are rocks coming down, watch out!" Tarkshya warned the soldiers, held Trasadasyu's hand and ran up.

Dodging the rolling rocks, soldiers brought Trisanu out.

"You stay back and take care of Ketumanta." Tarkshya advised Kalia.

"Don't let any soldier come beyond the fort. I will see King Trasadasyu to Ayodhye and return."

Kalia nodded his head to indicate 'All right'

The rocks had stopped rolling.

With the help of Nikambasura's rakshasa soldiers, Kalia had fished out Shambarasura's dead body. He stood weeping.

Trasadasyu had got to know the news of Shambarasura's sacrifice from Tarkshya.

He knelt by the dead body, humility marking his body language.

The dead body defied recognition. It had become a lump of flesh and blood.

"I didn't have the good fortune that you had, Shambarasura! One needs to have acquired spiritual merit even to die as a friend." Trasadasyu grieved.

"Yes. Shambarasura is a pious virtuous man." Tarkshya chimed in. "His last rites have to be performed in Ayodhye with all royal honours."

They put the dead body on a boat and crossing the river placed it in a chariot, sitting both Trisanu and Nikambasura in it, took them in a procession to Ayodhye that very night. Not even Trasadsyu the king got on the horse as a mark of respect to the departed soul.

The scene of the travel of that night imprinted itself indelibly in Trasadsyu's consciousness.

Shambarasura's last rites were done with all royal honours the following day.

A contingent of two hundred *rakshasas* had come from the Kashi border for the last rites.

Her Excellency came too to pay her homage of tears.

The *rakshasas* who usually evoked dread moved about freely on the Ayodhye streets and showed that they were also human beings.

Divodasa bit the dust in the war. Along with his soldiers he took shelter on the banks of the Suvarna.

Being true to his word, Bhadrasenya took possession of only the southern part of Kashi and ruled it for twenty years. After his death Divodasa occupied the southern part of Kashi.

The old Kashi mocked him, it seemed to him, however.

He founded another city called 'varanasi' at a distance of a couple of *krosus* to the south of Kashi.

The *bhushundi* that disappeared in the stony rubble was never found again. The kind compassionate Ganga river changed course and thus covered Shambarasura's memory with her waves.

Shambarasura's associates liked Ayodhye and became friends with the Ayodhyeins. Kanykubjas also started treating them with respect.

There was not only the twelfth day funereal rite for the dead and gone Shambarasura, but also a ritual sacrifice, the *yajna*.

Trasadasyu made that night's scene immortal by getting skilled calligraphers, and describing to them that night's scene and having them prepare a suitable text.

The visions of the deities of Maitra varuni had entered him and had filled his consciousness with a great deal of faith. He performed many ritual sacrifices in preparing himself as a demigod.

Sage Vamadeva, who returned from the Himalayas, has sung the praises of the *yagas* that he performed and his profuse brave-hearted munificence. His disciple Devadema's name doesn't figure in the Vedas.

Purukutsani died in the mango grove of snakebite after six years.

Tarkshya lived on for another ten years. Functioning as Trasadasyu's mother, father, guru, premier and commander-in-chief, all rolled into one, he brought Ayodhye into some semblance of control and prosperity.

His name is however nowhere to be found in Ayodhye's history. In fact there are many valiant men of substance who don't get into the limelight, who get lost in the crowded pages of history. They remain as unsung servants, pretty much like the unripe fruit that remains unseen behind the leaves till the very end, before they fall off. Tarkshya survives only in Triksha, the name of Trasadasyu's son.

EPILOGUE

1

Trasadasyu the demigod immortalized the saga of Shambarasura's self-effacing sacrifice on a plaque*. That is still there. It picturises on one side Trasadasyu walking toward Ayodhye in pitch darkness with a torch with Shambarasura's dead body and with his own followers in tow.

Shambara's name (Samapara) figures also on another Trasadasyu plaque. The depiction however wasn't that pictorial.

More splendid than these two is another pictograph where the incident of His Highness tolerating Vrishajana's censure and reproach with undisguised disdain is captured in a silent symbol. It is rare to find a more irradiating, fierce, tolerant and meaningful plaque among the whole of the Harappa-Mohenjodaro plaques:

Darkness in the vast spaces of an open ground. A deer is striding along in the dark. Its sights are trained on the two stars that have appeared in the firmament.

Behind it at a distance are two scorpions, which are trying to walk in step with an elephant and to bite the pachyderm. The distance between the scorpions and the pachyderm is however increasing.

The eyes of the deer (i.e Trasadasyu) are riveted on the twin stars (Mithuna, then called Mitravaruna) in the sky.

The light from these stars in fact founds the deer's lust for life.

But should a scorpion chase it? This is not without reason. The scorpion i.e *vrischika* is the paronomasic poem composed by Trasadasyu on Vrishajana's name. The image of 'the elephant and the scorpion' (No 371) is the cover picture.

The basic inspiration for this poetic irony is the poem written by Vrishajana. This verse bristles with bitter reproach.

The poetry written by a petty mind is also petty. Even the vile mind feels a continuous righteous sympathy. Even a low vile person turns his helpless anger into poetry. He gets his quietude there. He recalls the incidents through his pettiness and describes the truth as he sees it. A little poetic quality accrues through righteous virtuous sympathy. However the poetry would have the stamp of pettiness. A perverse poet is far and away better than a petty poet. A perverse poet would give his own ironic form to the poetry to invest the incidents he describes with a sarcastic meaning. He wouldn't get stuck in the bog of sorrow. A base mind would be bogged knee-deep in just recalling the incidents. So even if he composes poetry, he is not free.

Within fifteen days of Vatsaraja sending Vrishajana off to the village of Tamralepa, Vrisha joined his army, honouring as he did his invitation. His ambition was that he would get the Ayodhye king to invite him back to Ayodhye by teaching them a lesson with his bravery. But his jealousy, anger and hate hadn't abated. He was full of the ambition of displaying his valour as a soldier. There were already in his hymns these thoughts of the people's censure and the proud feeling of showing them that he could do

what they couldn't. A petty mind is petty even in the poetry that it creates.

kumaram maataa yuvatihii samudhham guhaa bharti na dadaati pitre I

aniikamasya na minajjanasaha puraha paschanti nihatamaratau II

kamenam tvam yuvate kumaram peeshii bhibharshi mahishii jajaaana I

puuvirhii garbhaha sharadoo vavrdhaapashayam jaatam yadasuuta maataa II

hiranyadantam shuchivarnamaaraat ksheetraadapashyam ayudhaa mimaanam I

dadaanoo asmaa amritam viprakvatim maamanindraahaa krinavannanukthaa II

kshetraadapashyam amutaha charantam sumadyuutham na puram shoobhamaanamI

na taa agrbhrnnajanishta hi shaha palikniridhuvatiyo bhavanti II

kee me maryakam vi yavanta goobhirna yeeshaam goopaa arnashchidaasa I

ya iim jagrbhurava tee srjantvaajaarti pashva upa nashchikitvan II

(1.The youthful Mother keeps the Boy pressed to her close, secretly. Nor does she yield him to the father. But when he lies upon her arm, people see his unfolding countenance!

2. What child is this you carry as handmaid, O

---

* Sir John Marshall, seal no 65; S.M. Punekar (1984): Mohenjodaro seal no 65,pp 98-99, Delhi: Caxton Publication

Youthful One? The consort-queen has borne him. The unborn babe grew through many autumns. I saw him being borne when his mother gave birth to him.

3. I saw him from afar, golden-toothed, bright-coloured, wielding (flame-like) weapons when I gave him pure unalloyed nectar. What can those who acknowledge not Indra, who repeat not his praise (=atheists), do unto me?

4. I saw him moving from the place he dwells in, with a herd, shining refulgently. These didn't hold him: he had already been born. They who were grey with age become young again.

5. Who separated my young bull from the herd of cattle? They whose protector was in truth no stranger? Let those whose hands have seized them free them. May He, the Observer, drive the herd toward us!)

(Rigveda 5-2)

By making use of his intelligence, of his own leadership qualities and his friendship with Vatsaraja, Vrisha Bhatta learnt charioteering in the next two to three months, learnt how to aim and shoot arrows before getting appointed as the commander of a contingent of ten soldiers. Soon he also assumed the position of Vatsaraja's charioteer. When he was thus on the ascendancy, he started to compose these poems and writing them away on palmyra leaves. But he never sang them in front of others because of many inhibitions. In the meanwhile he got a pressing call from Bhima Bhatta to go over to Tamralepa immediately. Wondering what had happened, Vrisha Bhatta went over in a hurry, assuming it would be for two days. Driven by his desire to showcase his poetic talent to his father, he took along the palmyra leaves on which were written his verses!

At home his wife was pregnant. Mother was preparing for the religious and domestic festival held on perceiving the first signs of a living conception!

Bhima Bhatta sat in the front verandah, sulking anger playing on his face. He wouldn't talk to his son.

The devil of doubt plagued Bhima Bhatta, a doubt that neither his mother nor his son nor his daughter-in-law had. He burst into a roar the moment his son talked to him. But he wouldn't say what the matter was.

People in the town thrilled to see Vrisha Bhatta in royal robes. Bhima Bhatta however was not happy. "Family-wrecker! You indecent indecorous slob!" he hollered. It wasn't known whether the name-calling was meant for his son or his daughter-in-law.

Old memories came back to Vrisha Bhatta, and furious anger burnt up in him as well. "I am not Vrisha Bhatta, I am Vrishajana. Tell father!" he exorted his mother, his voice loud and earnest. That's all. There was no direct dialogue with the father.

His father was also an opponent of Purukutsani, Trasadasyu, Simha Bhatta and Tarkshya. Vrisha had thought that his father would certainly like the verses that he had composed criticising these people. It was pecisely because of this crazy thought that he had brought home the bundle of poems he had written. But his father wouldn't hear of them!

Vrisha felt convinced that his father was making the same charge against him and his wife as he had made against Purukutsani in his poems.

He felt disturbed by the realisation that his father was making the same allegation against his about-to-be-born son as he had made against Trasadasyu.

It occurred to him that his father doubted his wife with

an unknown man in mind, and with the charge that he had made against Simha Bhatta in mind. "Why is father flying off the handle?" he asked his wife in private in the night. "He didn't like you taking up a Kshatriya job?" she replied. "I guess you don't have any objection, do you?" "Please don't orphan our child!" she said, sobbing. Genuine love for his wife, the kind that had never felt before, flooded Vrisha jana's heart.

Besides this there was this oath in his poetry: "I will sweat blood for those who expelled me from Ayodhye and make them invite me back into Ayodhye!" This was in fact a charge against Tarkshya.

Oaths were the only redeeming feature of that poetry. The rest was a cowardly allegation. The inevitability of a woman making the life of a king bitter. A useless allegation.

Vrisha felt disgust about himself.

Vrisha Bhatta stayed there for two days, quietly attended the function, flung his poetry into a dustbin there, before returning to his camp without having a second look at his father.

The daughter-in-law had seen Vrisha throw the palmyra leaves into the dustbin. She had seen her husband bring those palmyra leaves when he came home. She thought he had omitted to take them back. She gave them to Bhima Bhatta.

Bhima Bhatta read them, and was delighted. "My son is a sage, a poet and a creator of the Vedas!" he effused, praising his son. He taught them to a village boy before sending him off on the shandy day to the palace saying, "If you utter these before His Excellency along with an invocation of well-being, you will be rewarded."

Trasadasyu gave him the plaque of 'the deer and the scorpion' as the guru's present, a gesture of respect that a teacher does his student. Tarkshya stopped him at the doorway before telling him, "I will give you one varaha if you hit the guru and injure him in the forehead!" The worthy student did the gesture of respect to the teacher well before disappearing!

Bhatta stashed away the palmyra leaves and the plaque, tying them up to a piece of wood.

The Second Dasharajna war went on for twenty years.

Vrishajana came to know of his father's death after four years.

He had by that time risen in the army as the commander and as a trusted and recognised lieutenant of His Majesty. Having learnt of his father's demise, he returned to Tamralepa. Never to return to the war!

2

King Purukutsa desired to see his son Trasadasyu. He also longed for a physical union with his wife. Furious anger welled in him at the thought of his wife conceiving and begetting a son in his absence. Love surged as well. He also felt a mite of bored disgust because of his frustrating incarceration. The rumoured news of his release from jail for a month did reach him. In the one hundred and fifth hymn of the first section of the Rigveda this ambivalence has emerged. The authors of the Rigveda have called the creator of this hymn 'kutsa' or 'trita aapta' This Kutsa is none other than Purukutsa. 'Trita apta' means 'one who has got Trasadasyu indirectly' The word 'or' seems to have been used for Purukutsa's honour. In the hundred Mohenjodaro seals that I have read Trasadasyu's name has

been described as 'Tritu', 'Tridhattha' and 'Trasadasyu'. Sayana has interpreted the hymn as 'one who has fallen into a well' based on the understanding of the authors of 'Brihaddevata'. We understand the humanitarian aspect of it if we interpret it as Purukutsa himself. Had Sayana seen the Harappa seal, he would have duly interpreted Purukutsa's hymn as it really means, based on the understanding that 'Trita' was indeed Trasadasyu himself.

1 chandramaa apsantaraa suparnoo dhaavate divi I no voo hiranyaneemayaha padam vindanti vidyutoo I vittam mee asya roodasi II

The moon is travelling in the celestial space of the skies. Oh the rays that shine on his golden edges! I am unable to understand the basis of your happiness. Oh! You, the heaven and the earth! Please understand my misery!

2. aartha midvaa u arthina aa jaaya yuvatee patim I tumjaataa vrishnyam payaha paridaaya rasam duhee I vishavam mee asya roodasii II

He who wants money obtains money. The young wife couples with her husband, experiences exquisite delight and gets inseminated by him. Oh you, the heaven and the earth! Please understand my misery!

3 mee shu deevaa adaha svaarava paadi divaspari I
maa somyasya shmbhuvaha shuunyee bhuuma kadaachana I
vittam mee asya roodasi II

Oh Gods! Let my forefathers not get dismissed from heaven. Let forefathers who are worthy of the Soma sacrifice not come down to earth because they didn't beget worthy children!

Oh you, the heaven and the earth! Please understand my misery!

4 yajnam prichhamyavamam sa tadhuutoo vivoocca ti I

kva ritam puurvam gatam kastadbhibhati nutanoo I
vittam mee asya roodasi II

I will ask first of all the yagnapurusha, viz Lord Vishṇu. Let his representative viz agni, the fire-god himself give it a thought and answer. Where did his sense of jusice and fairplay go? Has any new god got it? Oh You, the heaven and the earth! Please understand my misery!

5 *amii yee deevaa sthana trishvaa roochanee divaha I*
kvadva ritam kadanratam kva pratnaa va ahutihi I
vittam mee asya roodasii II

Let those gods who were in the most beautiful of the three worlds viz. Heaven answer! What is just and what is unjust? What are the sacrifices that I offered you earlier? (what fruits did they give me?) Oh You, the heaven and the earth! Please understand my misery!

6 kvadva ritasya dharnasi kvadvarunasya chakshanam I
kardayamnoo mahaspathaati krameema duudhyoo I
vittam mee asya roodasii II

Where is the sustaining basis of your sense of justice? What happened to Varuna's wisdom, his sense of judgment and discrimination? What happened to the royal road of Aryamana, the deliverer of sufferers? Oh You the heaven the earth! Please understand my misery!

7. *aham soo asmi yaha puraa sutee vadaami kaani chit I*
tam maa vyamtyaadhyoo vrikoo na trishnajam mrigam I
vittam mee asya roodasii II

I am here who prayed earlier for a son. Such mental agonies are plaguing me the way white ants eat into wood that I can't speak now with my own son. Oh You, the heaven and the earth! Please understand my misery!

8. *sam maa tapantyabhitaha sapatniiriva parshavaha I*
muushoo na shishnaa vyadantimaadhyaha stootaaram tee shatakratoo I

vittam mee asya roodasii II

Oh you, God Indra! Inferior women friends haunt me like co-wives, me who has glorified you, sang your praises. Mental worries are taking the hell out of me, the way mice gnaw at threads of cloth. Oh you, the heaven and the earth! Please understand my misery!

It is known even before this that Purukutsa was a poet. This is an excellent poem of his.

That he too knew about its properties will figure later. That he bristled with anger at Mriganayane when he came to know about the birth of the son is probable. 'parshavoo' means 'mean inferior women'. Sayana has interpreted the word 'parshava' to mean 'the sharp jutting stones in a well' based on the authors of 'Brihaddakara' who interpreted 'kritsa', 'trita' and 'aptya' as 'the one who has fallen into a well'. In other stanzas the meaning of 'parshava' has emerged clearly as 'woman'

9. amii yee saptarashmayastatraa mee naabhiraatataa I
tritatstadveedaaptyaha sa jaamitvaaya reebhati I
vittam me asya roodasii II

Seven rays of that place (Ayodhye) have entwined my entrails (the navel). I have known that Trasadasyu has got Trita. I am longing for a release from prison. Oh you, the heaven and the earth! Please understand my misery!

10. amii yee panchaookshanoo madhye
tasthurmahoodivaha I
deevatraa nu pravaachyam sadhriichiinaa ni vaavrataha I
vittam mee asya roodasii II

Let these five arrows, which have stood in celestial space, float across together to the gods and tell this and return early. Oh You the heaven and the earth! Please understand my misery!

Besides being witness to the fact that there stirred love in Purkutsa for purukutsani for the moment, this rigvedic mantra is evidence of the fact that there existed the concept of 'Five Arrows' as early as the Vedic times.

1. suparnaa eeta aasatee meedhya aaroodhanee divaha I
tee seedhanti pathoo vrikam tarantam yahva tiiapoo I
vittam mee asya roodasii II

Let eagles (= good thoughts) that float in the mind push aside the wolf (=the evil thought) that comes in the way in the turbid waters of the mind!

--- This means that the thought of killing Trasadasyu's child might have occurred to the disturbed Purukutsa once in a while. This has been suppressed with the help of the image of the wolf.

12. navyam taduktyam hitam deevaa saha
supravaachanam I
ritamarshanti sindhavaha satyam taataana suuryoo I
vittam mee asya roodasii II

This brand new poem is good to the gods and is very much recitable. Rivers announce nothing but what is just. The sun proclaims nothing but the truth. Oh you, the heaven and the earth! Please understand my misery!

Purukutsa, who rose above dualities like desire-disappointment, happiness-sorrow, has eulogised in the end the sense of justice of the gods. (There are nine more stanzas, all of which are for sympathy and solace.)

That the Harappa seals shed fresh light on the interpretation of the meaning of the Vedas is clear.

3

After about a thousand years Veda Vyasa's eleven disciples roamed about villages and towns and collected

ancient *mantras*, songs, eulogies, legends, and tales. Vrishajana's descendants offered the palmyra leaves of his compositions to Bashkali, an assiduous workaholic disciple of Veda Vyasa's. Bashkali who believed in the maxim of 'Everything that is old is good and just' incorporated Vrisha's poems in the Rigveda. The liberal-minded Vyasa was hurt, but he agreed because they were old records. People who followed thought Vrisha was also a sage and so began to read meanings of yajna into his compositions. They also put together fabricated cock-and-bull stories and miracles about Vrisha. This is the irony of history. Vrisha was not as evil as his father, nor was he an ascetic renunciate. He was a small poet.

Some people have objected to the fact that, of all his compositions, I mentioned only Vrishajana's (Vedic) Hymn of the Science of Polity.

I believe that Vrishajana's poems are only those from which emerge meanings of Vrisha's moral life. Somebody else has created the rest. Only then is a preamble meaningful. Only then is a separation of his individual self possible. There have arisen extraordinary fanciful tales about the meaning that I have discarded. It is better to ignore them. Vrisha's human defects and failures are clear in the very first interpretation.

The firepower of the woman of our age is manifest in Purukutsani's personality. That Purukutsa has to become weak is natural. He has been glorified in the Vedas. This the novel hasn't accepted. One has to say the following however. Purukutsani is a good example of the 'inward logic' that obtains in the characters of novels.







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